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MIKE SHAYNE MYSTERY MAGAZINE

MAY 1979,
VOL. 43, NO. 2

NEW MIKE SHAYNE SHORT NOVEL

MURDER ON THE AISLE

by BRETT HALLIDAY

Lucy's nephew is slain and Lucy herself dangerously wounded by an unknown assassin. So the Miami Redhead has a double motive for tracking down a hired killer ..... *5 to 37*

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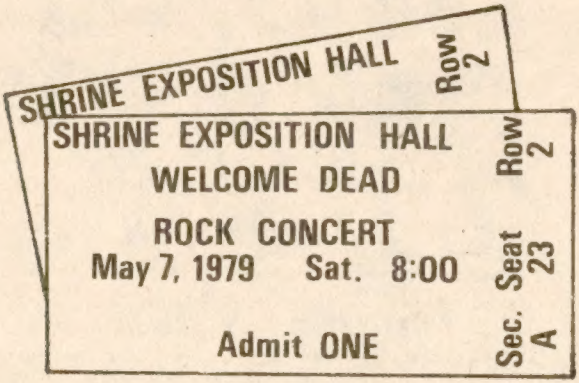
Murder On The Aisle



by BRETT HALLIDAY

When Lucy is Critically Wounded in an Attempt on the Redhead's Life, Shayne Is Out for Blood.

MIKE SHAYNE was in a black mood, and had been since flying back to Miami Beach from Chicago, where he had gone to help another former Marine, Luther Thomas, deal with an extortion threat. Luther was a building contractor. He had been told it would cost him $100,000 to prevent arson on his various building sites.

When, in his own opinion, Shayne botched a case Lucy Hamilton, his very private secretary, had seen him in the pits for a few days, during which he always refused to take a drink. But this fit of depression had lasted for two weeks. It didn't make sense. He hadn't failed in Chicago.

It had taken the redhead a month of dangerous undercover work, posing as an out-of-town gangster from Tucson, to ferret out the identity of the extortionist (a former employee of Luther Thomas Building Enterprises), and catch him in the act of making good this threat. He had brought back for deposit a $20,000 check.

So Lucy wondered why Mike Shayne was morose and not drinking. Whatever it was that bothered him was locked up inside. It annoyed Lucy to be shut out of his confidence. For years she had been the big detective's confidante, as well as his Girl Friday.

He was in his East Flagler Street office with feet up on his desk, making a paper-clip chain while staring out the window. The

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desk was bare of its usual litter. From the few times Lucy remembered his being down before, neatness was a symptom. He had spent hours yesterday bringing some kind of order to his usually disheveled filing system.

They had lunched at the Scotch & Sirloin, during which Lucy tried her best to make conversation, with no help whatsoever from Mike. Sitting at her desk with a pang of deep-green jealousy, Lucy wondered if it were a woman he had met in Chicago.

That thought raised Lucy from a simmer to a boil. She stormed into Shayne's small office and pushed his feet off the desk.

"What gives?" He stared up in surprise at the angry woman.

"That is exactly what I intend to find out," Lucy said. "Since you came back from Chicago and whatever happened there, you've been just about as warm and friendly as a grizzly bear with a sore paw. I'm sick and tired of it. You sat through lunch today without a decent word. Not even an indecent one. So why did you buy my lunch? I'll tell you why. You wanted an audience of one for your sulking act, Michael."

Mike Shayne regarded Lucy with new respect. "Your halo is crooked, Angel."

Involuntarily, Lucy's hand jumped to her hair.

He smiled. It was the first time in two weeks Lucy had seen that smile, but she wasn't finished yet.

"What's her name, Michael?" she asked.

"Audrey," he said. Mike got up from his chair and stretched.

Having her suspicion so quickly confirmed confused Lucy Hamilton.

"Audrey O'Brien," Shayne told he. "And she's thirteen years old. Pretty as a picture, too. Bob O'Brien wanted money to send her off to a private school, but he was out of work and blacklisted after Luther fired him for stealing from one of their sites. Sit down, Lucy." He held his desk chair for her. "I want to tell you a story."

"Yes, Michael." Lucy was suddenly contrite and ashamed of her outburst of temper.

Shayne paced his office while he talked. "I conned that youngster, Lucy. Without knowing it, she set up her father for the collar. Some heavy boys were about to move in on him, so maybe I've saved his life by getting him a few years in the slammer. But using Audrey the way I did hurts me down where I live. Can you understand that?"

"Does she have a mother?" Lucy asked.

"No. Just her father, and he's going away for awhile. He wanted to send her to Miss Bristol's Academy in New Haven. It's an excellent school but expensive as hell."

"How expensive?" Lucy asked.

After a struggle with himself, Lucy realized Mike Shayne had finally made up his mind. "That's

what *you're* going to find out," he said. "Put in a call for Miss Bristol."

"Oh, *no!*" Remembering the balance on their last bank statement, Lucy wanted to wring her hands. "If I know what's coming, Michael, you can't afford it. Having your Buick overhauled is going to cost you a mint. And that trick Mercedes you're renting, with all those safety gadgets is another load. Besides, as long as you mope around, we're sailing very close to the wind. Why don't you pay more *attention* to your money? You work hard enough for it."

The detective was staring out the window, hands clasped behind him. "My Buick was clapped out."

"Do you have any idea how expensive it is to keep a girl in an exclusive boarding school?" Lucy asked.

"No," he admitted. "That's why I want you to talk with Miss Bristol. You're Audrey's wealthy aunt. Keep me out of it."

"Lord in heaven!" Lucy gave up.

Shayne pulled her up out of the chair and held her tight. "After you've made that call, you can fix us a quick drink," he said. "Tonight, we do the town."

Lucy left him rummaging through his well-ordered files and scattering folders on his desk. "Now I can't find a damned thing!" she heard him mutter.

From her desk she buzzed the redhead's phone. "What are you looking for, Michael?"

"Now I can't remember," he said and laughed.

"Welcome back to the human race," Lucy said. "We've missed you."

"Hurry up that call and the drinks, Angel" he told her.

Lucy dialed information.

"Your desk now looks as if the puppies got to it," Lucy said half an hour later. "Find what you were looking for?"

Right!" Mike Shayne held up a dog-eared file folder triumphantly. "Remember Catherine Voelker, the psychologist up in Palm Beach? Twin sister of the girl whose attempt to swindle her old man backfired?"

"I remember her very well," Lucy said. "Are you going into therapy?"

"No. Give her a ring and get the name of a good woman psychologist in Chicago, will you?"

"Does it have to be a woman?" Lucy asked.

"I don't know. Audrey is a girl."

"Don't worry about it," Lucy said. "Miss Bristol informs me that for a thousand a semester her girls have the best psychologist in Connecticut on tap. She's sure our little Audrey will quickly become adjusted, regardless of her orphaned estate."

"That much?" Shayne asked.

"That much," Lucy assured

him. "Clothes and books are extra. Riding lessons are extra, too."

Shayne groaned.

"I promised to call Miss Bristol back," Lucy told him. "Want to change your mind?"

"*No.* In for a dime, in for a dollar. Set Audrey up to begin next fall, then call a Mrs. Walker in Chicago. She's the welfare worker in charge of Audrey's case. And, Lucy?"

"Yes?"

"No riding lessons. We've got to cut corners somewhere, and she might fall off the horse."

"No problem, Michael," Lucy said. "There's an additional fee you'll have to pay for a clinic right there at the school."

Shayne sighed. "Okay. *Riding* lessons!"

Lucy paused. "I don't know how to say this."

He grinned. "Just open your mouth and give it a try."

"You're one hell of a good man, Mike Shayne."

"Cut the Hearts and Flowers, will you?" The redhead blushed. "We'll claim Audrey as some kind of a dependent when income tax time rolls around again. She's our tax shelter, Angel. Strictly business."

"Whatever you say." Lucy turned to leave.

"Hurry those drinks," Shayne growled. "Scratching an itchy conscience always makes me thirsty."

"By the way, before I forget," Lucy said. "A pair of tickets for the *Welcome Dead* concert came in the mail yesterday. Two front center on the aisle."

"Who sent them?" He asked.

"I don't know. One of your secret admirers, I'd guess. Will you take me?"

"When is it?"

"Tomorrow night."

"Don't you have a cousin coming into town?" Mike asked.

"That's *right*," Lucy said. 'I almost forgot. Danny is anxious to meet you."

"I think he'll enjoy the *Welcome Dead* concert more than I would," Shayne told Lucy. "I want to get together with Tim Rourke. I've promised him a run-down on the Chicago thing."

Lucy smiled. "You're the only person I know who has a star reporter as P.R. man."

"Right now we need business," He said.

"That's for sure, since I've acquired a teen-age niece," Lucy told him. "That makes you a surrogate uncle, by the way. And leaves both of us nearly penniless."

"Yeah," Shayne said. "Worst comes to worst we can hock the car."

"I thought you once told me you'd never drive anything you couldn't afford to own, Michael."

"*Hey!*" He replied. "Don't believe everything I tell you.

Sometimes I lie."

II

MIKE SHAYNE SPENT Saturday morning and Saturday afternoon in his apartment, reading. He didn't bother to tune in the Miami Dolphins-Chicago Bears pre-season game. September, not July, was when Mike thought the pro football season should start.

He nursed a glass of Martell over ice cubes, and broiled a two-inch-thick steak for lunch. For supper he had a date with Tim Rourke, reporter for the Miami *Daily News.*

The detective subscribed to every technical journal on criminology, and kept abreast the field, sometimes even ahead of his friend, Will Gentry, Miami Chief of Police.

"You read as much as my son the doctor," Gentry once told him, "and he's a brain surgeon."

But only Lucy Hamilton knew how catholic his reading tastes were. He devoured westerns and historical novels when he wasn't reading philosophical tomes. An athletic scholarship for playing All-American football had netted him a B.A. before his tour of duty with the Marine Corps, and then a fling at pro football, but Shayne felt concentration on athletics had robbed him of an educational opportunity.

It was six o'clock before he showered and shaved to keep his date with Tim Rourke. Lucy Hamilton called just before Shayne left his apartment.

"Is there anywhere we can meet you after the concert?" she asked. "Cousin Danny has to be in Key West tomorrow to meet some people."

"The Scotch & Sirloin?"

"That sounds all right. The concert should let out at eleven."

"See you and Danny then, Lucy. You both should be ready for a late supper after the *Welcome Dead.*"

"I'm sure we will be," Lucy said. "By the way, I finally reached Miss Walker. I got her at her home this morning. Everything's set for Audrey."

"Good! Did you mail a check for her first semester?" Mike asked.

"Yes, with my fingers crossed that it doesn't bounce," Lucy told him.

"You worry too much, Angel."

"Somebody has to," Lucy said. "I love you." Lucy's laugh was tremulous. "I just threw that in, Michael."

"*Hey!* Thanks. Consider it mutual."

"You're so romantic!"

"You'd better believe it where *you're* concerned," Mike said.

"I do, I do. See you later."

Mike Shayne found himself in an expansive mood when he met Tim at the Scotch & Sirloin table Lucy had reserved. He filled Tim in with everything he had learned about arson while he was on

assignment in Chicago.

"It's a regular, cut-and-dried business," Shayne said. "The syndicate families are into it to the hilt, and then there are the amateurs like Bob O'Brien. Working underground, I learned one hell of a lot, Tim. More than I bargained for, as a matter of fact."

"How much of what you've told me can I use?" Tim asked. "You've dropped some important names, you know — Eddie Ferguson, Carmen Guido, Jerry Brannigan. These are real heavies, man!"

"Don't I know it?" Shayne said. "Tell you what . . . identify me as as a reliable underworld source. The kind of heat they generate I can do without right now."

Tim grinned. "Getting chicken with advancing age, Mike?"

"No—just careful. I don't want any hassles right now that I can avoid."

"I always protect my sources," Tim assured him. "You know that. What about another round?"

"Are you buying?"

"If I have to."

Shayne glanced at his wristwatch. "I'm meeting Lucy and her cousin here in half an hour," he said. "I've had enough for now."

Tim pushed back his chair. "I can take a hint as well as anyone."

"Don't rush," the redhead told him. "Have another boilermaker. I'm buying."

"Deadline, Mike. See you around."

Tim was gone and the detective had moved into the bar to wait for Lucy and her Cousin Danny. It was a quiet Saturday night with the television turned off and a hi-fi radio station furnishing soft background music. Shayne decided to have another Martell on the rocks while he waited and had just beckoned the bartender.

The music on the radio cut out. "We have just received a news bulletin," the announcer said. "A man and a woman have been shot at the *Welcome Dead* concert. There will be more details on our eleven o'clock news."

The music resumed.

"Now how about *that?*" the bartender commented. "A couple of crazy acid heads I'd guess."

Mike Shayne felt as if someone had just hit him in the stomach.

"What'll it be? the bartender asked. "Same as usual, Mr. Shayne?"

"Nothing." The redhead strode toward the phone booth in the hallway outside the bar. Tickets from an unknown donor should have warned him, he thought. At the same time, he prayed he was wrong.

The police department desk sergeant didn't have any details. "Look, Shayne, all I know is what you just heard," he said. "Try the morgue or some of the

hospitals."

Shayne started to dial the morgue. *"Damn!"* He wasn't thinking straight. The victims would have been rushed to the nearest hospital emergency ward, regardless of their condition. He looked up the number of the Queen of Mercy Hospital.

Yes, the shooting victims had been admitted. No, we can't give out any names right now. Are you a relative?

Mike Shayne exploded. "How the hell do I know?"

"Sorry."

"Sorry be damned," the redhead said. "Connect me with the officers who brought them in. Tell them it's Mike Shayne calling and I have some information for the police."

There was a long wait but finally an Officer Osborne came on the wire. "What can we do for you?" he asked gruffly. "You got something for us?"

"Maybe," Shayne said. "Names first, though. Who are the victims?"

Officer Osborne evidently had to refer to his notes. "A Daniel Baldwin," he said finally, "and a Miss Lucy Hamilton. He was D.O.A."

Shayne's voice dropped to a whisper. "Miss Hamilton?"

"The woman got it bad but she's hanging on," Officer Osborne told Mike. "They took her upstairs a minute ago. She caught a slug in the head."

The detective hung up.

As if he were walking under water, he made it to the parking lot and began looking for his Buick, until he remembered it was in the shop for an overhaul and that he was driving a special rental Mercedes since his return from Chicago. Then he had to think a long moment to remember the rental car was light blue.

The Mercedes Mike Shayne was renting contained a CB as well as a police radio, and a telephone. It was a sedan with a small bar built into the rear compartment. He had also had a new device installed that electrified both door handles and the hood latch, so that anyone tampering with the automobile got a jolt of electricity strong enough to knock him or her down. Mike considered constant vigilance against a bomb planted in his car simply an occupational hazard.

The deactivator for the electronic doors and hood guard system was a combination planted on the driver's side under the car. The numbers were mixed and in Braille.

III

AT THE HOSPITAL, Shayne found Lucy was still in the operating room. Officer Osborne came up from Emergency when he learned Shayne had reached the

hospital. New on the force, after talking with the redhead, the young officer had learned who he was, and was impressed enough to want to meet Shayne.

"Me and my partner took the squawk, Mr. Shayne," he explained. "When we got there we had trouble finding the victims, what with all the shouting and stuff. We hauled 'em out on gurneys and nobody even looked around."

"Who has Chief Gentry assigned to the case?" Shayne asked.

"When he learned who she was, he said he's coming down himself. Ought to be here any minute. Who is this Miss Lucy Hamilton?"

"She works for me." It was an effort for the detective to be civil there in the operating waiting room. "Where was she hit?"

Officer Osborne touched the back of his neck. "Small caliber slug, Mr. Shayne. Down in Emergency I heard the docs say it might have been deflected from the brain by her skull. This Daniel Baldwin, though!"

Officer Osborne whistled softly. "Whoever it was used his head for a shooting gallery. Jesus! I've never seen anything like it." He paused and studied Shayne's craggy face for a moment.

"Know something, Mr. Shayne? Baldwin's got red hair. He's a shrimp stood up against you, but sitting down somebody that didn't look too close . . ." Officer Osborne hesitated, then said, "Well, I haven't made detective yet. I guess you got enough trouble, Mr. Shayne. I got to get back on patrol."

"Wait a minute." The shock of learning about Lucy had begun to wear off, and the redhead's detective instincts were taking over. "Osborne, shut your eyes for a minute."

"Yes, sir." Officer Osborne did as he was told. "What now?"

"When you got to the victims, what did you see that might be cronky?" Shayne asked.

"Cronky?" Officer Osborne's eyes popped open. "I don't get your meaning, Mr. Shayne."

"I'll explain," Shayne said. "You see a man on his knees in church and he's praying. That isn't cronky. Now you see this same man out in the middle of the boulevard at rush hours on his knees praying. That is cronky. Okay?"

"Oh, yeah." Officer Osborne smiled and shut his eyes again. "Let me see. Young people, mostly, jumping around like they got this St. Vitus dance, know what I mean?"

"Rock dementia," the detective said. "I have the picture. With your eyes closed, make that trip into the crowd, and back out with the gurneys. It's important."

"All right." Shayne had a willing pupil. "Like I said, nobody seemed to know somebody had been blown away. We got some dirty looks. Some of the kids

thought we were there to make a drug bust. Know what I mean?"

"Yes," Mike Shayne said. "Try harder."

Officer Osborne stood facing Mike, eyes shut tight. Others waiting in the room had begun to eye the pair, some with beginning alarm, others with amusement.

Suddenly the young man's eyes popped open. *"Cronky!* A man, middle-aged, I'd say, well groomed, snap brim hat, out of style these days but it didn't look bad on him. Gray at the temples. Didn't look like a rock fan. I remember thinking — doctor?

"We bumped into him while we were wheeling the gurneys. I remember the guy because he was the only one that really saw what we were taking out. He sort of shook his head. Then he was gone in the crowd."

"Why did you think he might be a doctor?" The redhead asked.

Officer Osborne frowned. "I don't know."

"Think!" Shayne grabbed the man's shoulders. "It could be important. Did he have a stethoscope hanging around his neck?"

"No. Nothing like that, but I've got it, Mr. Shayne. He had a briefcase."

"Not a doctor's bag?"

"No, but that's what I thought it was, until I looked closer."

Shayne patted Officer Osborne's shoulder. "My friend, one of these days you're going to make one hell of a detective."

"Thanks. Can you tell that to Chief Gentry?"

"It will be mentioned," Mike Shayne said.

Chief Will Gentry picked that moment to stride into the waiting room. "What are you doing up here, Osborne?" he snapped.

"My idea," Shayne said. "Osborne had some clues we're going to need."

With a quick salute, and a wink at the detective, Officer Osborne was gone.

"How is she?" Will asked.

"Hanging on," Mike Shayne said. "That's all I know. I haven't talked with the doctors yet."

Will took Shayne's arm and led him over to adjoining chairs.

"Let's get off our flat feet," he said. "This is liable to be the longest night of the year." They sat down. "All right, Mike. Who set up this Daniel Baldwin and Lucy? They *were* set up, weren't they?"

"Right." He told Gentry about the two concert tickets from an unknown donor. "My head wasn't screwed on straight," he said, "or I would have smelled a rat. Danny was Lucy's cousin. He came in from out of town. According to Osborne, the D.O.A. could look enough like me to fool a stranger with only a description. So what do we have?"

"Someone out to get you," Chief Gentry said with a wry smile. "That's hardly news."

"Right," Shayne said. "Add to

that Osborne's description of a man he thought might be a doctor." He explained to Gentry how he had gotten that information. "Sound like anyone we might know?" Mike asked.

Gentry frowned and shook his head.

"I'll guess a hitman from out of town," the detective said. "Tools of his trade in that briefcase, namely a small caliber semi-automatic weapon with a silencer. A twenty-two? We'll find that out."

Gentry scowled. "You could be right."

"Will, this thing is very personal with me," the redhead told his old friend. "I want that hitman, and I'm going to get him, but I also want whoever paid the price for having me blown away. Who are you giving this case?"

"You've got it," Gentry said. "Raise your right hand."

Shayne did as he was told.

"Do you swear to uphold the laws of Florida?" Chief Gentry asked.

"I do," Shayne said and, despite the strain of not knowing whether Lucy Hamilton would live or die, he could not resist asking, "Are we married now?"

"No. You're my special deputy," Will Gentry told him. "Every facility my department offers is yours to use. I'll do the paperwork tomorrow. Mike, God damn it! Get the bastards, and I don't much care how you do it."

"You have my word on that," Mike Shayne said in a grim voice. "I may have to cut a few corners, but I'm going to do it."

"Just don't let me find out about the corners," Gentry said.

"You won't," the redhead promised. "For starters, Will, I want the M.O. of every pro hitman who even faintly resembles the guy Osborne saw. You'll have to tap out the F.B.I. crime computer to get me that. Are you and the Feds on speaking terms?"

"This week," Gentry said. "What else do you need?"

"I've got my own sources who may come up with a lead, but have your detectives shake down all their stool pigeons who may know something. I'm guessing our boy is out-of-town talent. Yet *somebody* knows who he is, where he comes from and probably has an inkling as to who's got a contract out on me."

"You haven't?" Gentry asked.

"Not the faintest," Mike Shayne said. "It could check back to my last case in Chicago. But I can't say why."

"Can't or won't?" Gentry asked.

"Can't, Will. As the British would say, I haven't the foggiest. I worked underground in Chi on an arson-extortion thing for a buddy in the Marines once upon a time. I nailed the torch. In doing so, posing as a connected guy from Tucson, I met a lot of family men.

"Eddie Ferguson, Carmen

Guido and Jerry Brannigan are three. Eddie Ferg wanted me to blow away Carmen Guido for him. Carmen wanted one of his policy runners cancelled. Jerry Brannigan wanted me to torch a couple of supermarkets that weren't paying tribute.

"My cover story was that I got tired of hitting people in Arizona and New Mexico. I wanted something in arson. One of those three could have pushed this thing, but I doubt it. I cooled them out pretty good with a sick-mother-in-Albany yarn that gave me excuses for lamming east from Chicago."

"You get around in some seamy circles," Will Gentry said. "I've got a pretty decent Chicago police source I can squeeze, and I'll do it." He got up to leave. "Let me know how things work out here, Mike."

"I'll do that," Shayne promised.

IV

WHEN GENTRY was gone, he sat with his hands clasped between his knees, head down, and concentrated on Lucy Hamilton. She had to make it! If the bullet had damaged Lucy's brain, he'd see she was cared for the rest of her life.

Over the years and by gradual stages they had become lovers as well as secretary and boss. She was the only love in Mike Shayne's life. It was Lucy's idea that marriage would destroy the warm and easy relationship they now had.

"I tried that route once, Mike," she'd told him early in their intimate relationship. "I don't want to chance it again."

Shayne took Lucy Hamilton at her word and went out of his way to respect her independence. He had never asked about her former husband. It just wasn't his business. At the same time, he felt that they were closer than many married partners.

"Mike Shayne?"

He looked up to the tired doctor in green operating-room dress standing over him. The man's face told him nothing. Shayne got slowly to his feet.

"I'm Mike Shayne."

"You're listed as Miss Hamilton's nearest of kin, Mr. Shayne."

"How is she?" Mike Shayne asked.

"Very critical. We've been able to remove the bullet, a twenty-two if I'm not mistaken—fortunately. A larger caliber would have penetrated the skull. As it is, the bullet traveled from here—the doctor touched the nape of his neck—to here." He touched a spot behind his right ear. "It lodged in the porous mastoid. We removed it and the shattered bone, but her hair will cover the scar."

"Is she conscious?" Mike asked.

"No, she isn't, and it may take quite a while," the doctor told him, frowning. "She's had a severe concussion, Mr. Shayne. Intensive Care reports she has recovered from the anesthetic we administered but remains comatose. Prognosis, not too good. I'm speaking frankly with you."

"She won't die?"

"I think not. She's a strong young woman, but she's had a dreadful shock. It may be days or weeks before she emerges from the coma."

"When can I see her?"

"I'll leave word with IC to let you in for just a minute or two, Mr. Shayne, but don't expect Miss Hamilton to show any signs of recognition."

Shayne sat in the hospital coffee shop. Lucy had looked more beautiful than ever to him, despite the bandages swathing her head, and the I.V. bottles attached to either arm. She had lain in the high hospital bed as if she were asleep. He finished his coffee and lit a cigarette.

Assured that Lucy, barring any unforeseen pysiological accidents, would live, the redhead now found time to brood over what had happened.

Fact. Someone had set him up very carefully for a hit. Speculation. Lucy hadn't been included in the contract. A stray bullet from the fusillade that killed her cousin?

Fact. Daniel Baldwin was very dead instead of Mike Shayne. A pro hitman had made an unforgiveable mistake. A case of mistaken identity signed his death warrant. That meant, whoever he was, he'd be on the run from the mob as well as the police.

Speculation. Under these circumstances, where would he go to ground? Leave the country? Unlikely. Too easy to get caught at his point of departure, what with passport regulations. He would hardly have come to Florida expecting to leave the country.

Tim Rourke found the detective. "Damn, I'm sorry!" He sat down across the table from Shayne, his long features a sad mask. "Who the hell would want to blow away our Lucy?" Tim stubbed out his cigarette. "Mike, I'm on this story exclusively for the *Daily News.* I've talked with Will Gentry, and he's told me you're a special deputy now. How can I help?" help?"

"Has he told you what we suspect?" Mike asked.

Tim nodded. "Will trusts me these days."

"You've got street sources," Shayne said. "Find out what's going around now this thing has come down. It's going to make a big underworld spatter, and somebody is going to be caught with egg on his face. I want just a hint as to who that somebody is."

"Got it," Tim said.

Now Lucy was temporarily safe on this side of death, the redhead's adrenalin had began flowing, and he could no longer sit still. The anger he had felt when he first learned Lucy had been shot, and her cousin killed, by a hired gun who wanted his life, was turning to cold rage. He pushed back his chair.

"Mike, you look like death warmed over." Tim spoke with concern in his voice. "You need a stiff drink, breakfast and sleep in that order. There's a cot in my office. Why don't you shack up there for a few hours? I'll be running after my snitches, and the board can take your messages."

Shayne squeezed the gangling reporter's shoulder. "You're all heart, Tim, and thanks—but no thanks. I've places to go and things to do."

"How do we keep in touch?" Tim asked.

"You have my private number at the apartment," Shayne told him. "At the sound of the gong, leave a message. Okay?"

"Oh, you've got *that* deal now." Tim was impressed. "What about your car phone? I noticed the new wheels in the parking lot."

Mike gave Tim the number.

"If you want to call me on CB my handle is Irish," Mike told Tim. "I need any leads you can get, Tim."

"You've got 'em," Tim said. "Lucy is going to make it, Mike. Hold that thought."

When he had deactivated his Mercedes, Mike tapped the back compartment bar for a Martell neat then drove to the Tamiami Coffee Shop for a late breakfast. He sat at the counter and ordered steak and eggs. Seldom had Mike Shayne found himself so emotionally involved in a case, and he realized the inherent danger. It could interfere with his judgment at a critical moment.

This was one case he couldn't afford to blow, especially now that Will Gentry had deputized him. Will's job could go down the drain if he should drop on an innocent party.

So, while he waited for his order, Shayne began to organize his thinking, pushing away for the time being Lucy's plight.

As long as she had been with him, he had never heard Lucy mention having any cousins. The name Daniel Baldwin had never come up, yet she had called him Danny.

Where did Danny come from, where was he going, who were his people? They would have to be informed, so funeral arrangements could be made. By this time, Will Gentry would have that information insofar as personal possessions could tell him. It would be routine for Will to run a make on the dead man.

When Shayne had finished his breakfast, he dialed the department and asked for Chief Gentry. "What do we have on Daniel

Baldwin?" he asked the chief.

"Zilch," Gentry told him in a puzzled tone of voice. "There was nothing on the body, Mike. No billfold, no keys, no money. I can't understand it. You're sure he was Lucy's cousin?"

"Reasonably," Mike Shayne said. "She claimed kin. Lucy doesn't lie as far as I know."

"His prints have gone up to the F.B.I.," Will Gentry said. "We'll have something this afternoon. We do have a couple of complaints about pocket picking at that concert. Could be what happened. In that kind of crowd, the cannons keep busy."

"Could be," the redhead admitted. "But I don't like it."

"Neither do I," Gentry said.

"I'll keep in touch," Shayne promised and hung up.

V

FROM THE COFFEE shop he drove to his apartment. What he needed was a toothbrush, shaving tackle and a change of clothes. Whoever had a contract on his life, he was sure, would not stop trying, and the hitman already on the job might try to correct his mistake before organization enforcers caught up with him.

The slip of paper thrust between the door and jamb a few inches from the floor was undisturbed. The redhead let himself into the apartment.

As if someone had been posted to watch for him to arrive, the phone rang. He picked it up.

"Shayne?" A man's husky voice.

He didn't answer.

"That you, Shayne?" The caller was making no effort to disguise his voice.

Shayne still didn't answer.

"Okay, Shayne. So you're listening. Just a friendly tip, Shayne. That girl of yours seen who done it at the concert. This is a friendly call. Keep her under wraps."

Mike's caller hung up. For a moment the detective stared at the dead instrument. Then he jiggled the phone to reestablish a dial tone before calling Will Gentry.

The Chief of Polic was out of his office, and his secretary didn't know when to expect him back. Mike tried the hospital next and discovered Lucy, although still in a coma, had been moved to a private room. He asked for the hospital's security officer.

"Banes speaking," the man said when he came on the line. "How can I help you, Mr. Shayne?"

"You have Lucy Hamilton as a patient," Shayne said.

"Yes, I know, Mr. Shayne. She came in last night with a gunshot wound. But you know that. Chief Gentry just spoke with me a few moments ago, and I've put one of my best men upstairs at the door

of her room until a policeman arrives to take his place. This is why you called, isn't it?"

"It is," Mike said. "Thanks, Banes."

"It's our job, Mr. Shayne," Banes said in a cheerful voice.

When Mike had broken the connection, he stared thoughtfully into space. Gentry had evidently decided Lucy might be in danger, or his husky-voiced friend had warned Will, too. Whichever the case, Lucy was under wraps.

Mike Shayne considered the significance of the warning. Someone in the local crime hierarchy had made the call, he felt sure. *Why?* It didn't make sense from what he already knew or had guessed. Unless some outsider had invaded Miami and Miami Beach to make a hit without permission from the various crime overlords who considered Florida neutral territory, the Switzerland of gangland. If this were true, it did make sense.

It was something to bear in mind as his investigation progressed.

Shayne packed a bag. Until matters settled into some understandable pattern, it would be just as well if he did not stay at his apartment. He'd also avoid his office. He didn't want to be a predictable target until he was certain from what direction the shooting might come.

Eddie Savanarola, also called Eddie Duggan — Shayne knew him only by reputation because Eddie was fairly new to the Miami and Miami Beach area. He had come to Florida from Las Vegas about six month ago, and functioned as a bookies' bookie. Too-heavy action they laid off on Eddie.

It was rumored that Eddie S. had excellent connections with crime figures in every principal city because they had learned to respect his integrity and honesty in a basically illegal and dishonest business.

During the season Shayne made a tidy income betting on professional football. He never bet more than $100 on any one game, but when he laid down his money it was always on three different games.

He ignored the trap of point spreads and bet win or lose. Only once had he lost money on all three of the games being played. He usually bet on the three winning teams to the chagrin of his bookmaker, John Trumbull.

It was from John that he learned about shadowy Eddie S. Mike's next phone call was to Trumbull.

"Shayne, what's your pleasure?" Trumbull asked. "You don't usually bet until the regular season starts. You getting reckless these days? I can give you odds on Detroit."

"No bet," Mike said. "I need to meet Eddie S."

"Who he?" Trumbull bluffed.

"Don't play games, John. I'm not in the mood." Mike Shayne's voice had gone hard and level. "I need information and I think Eddie's got it."

"Shayne, Eddie's a very private sort of guy," Trumbull said. "He don't like nobody contacting him unless it's for a layoff. He's never been busted and don't intend to start getting a sheet now."

Trumbull had given the detective pause for thought. He already knew from the grapevine that Gentry had appointed him a special deputy in this case. Mike Shayne tried a different approach.

"I'm not out to bust our friend," he said in a conciliatory tone. "One day he might need my help. When he does, he's got it if he'll meet me somewhere we can talk off the record now."

"I don't know, Mike."

"Talk with Eddie. Tell him what I've said. No harm in doing that, is there?"

"I suppose not," Trumbull said, but he was hesitant.

"Who's Detroit playing tonight?" Shayne asked.

"The Rams."

"Put me down for three bills on Detroit, Johnny."

"For you, that's a bundle. Ain't you going to ask me the odds?"

"I'll go even money."

John Trumbull heaved a sigh. "You're bribing me, Shayne. Detroit ain't got a prayer."

"Miracles happen."

"You're down for three big ones on Detroit, sucker," Trumbull said. "I'll buzz Eddie."

"Thanks, Johnny."

"You going to be at that number awhile?"

"Say half an hour," Shayne told Trumbull.

"Don't hold your breath. Eddie S. is a funny sort of guy. Low key, if you get my meaning. Maybe he'll call you, maybe he won't."

"I'll just have to take that chance," the redhead said.

"Good-bye, Johnny."

"Say good-bye to your three hundred, Shayne. Sure you want to make that bet? It ain't necessary."

"Let it stand," Shayne told him.

He decided against another shot of Martell while he was waiting, but went to the liquor cabinet and found a full fifth to tuck into his bag. Then he sat by the phone. Half an hour later, it hadn't rung. Shayne began to pace. The picture of Lucy in a coma crowded into his mind.

The phone rang once and he had it before it could ring again. "Shayne here."

"What can I do for you, Shayne?" It was the same husky voice Mike had heard earlier. "For keeping the heat off me when Gussie Goodman got snuffed and I was left holding all the markers, I owe you one. Right then, Federal heat would have burned me."

"We're even," Shayne said.

"Lucy is under guard."

"Glad to hear it."

"Can we meet somewhere?"

"No. Ask your question."

"Who was the trigger man?" Shayne said.

"I've got only his moniker—'Snappy.' Whoever sent him don't know more than that. He works free-lance, like me."

"That isn't much to go on," the detective said.

"It's all I got," Savanarola told him.

"You know Lucy eyeballed him," Shayne prompted.

There was a moment of silence on the other end of the line. "Yeah," Savanarola said finally. "Do you know Hal Mendel?"

"No. Should I?" Shayne asked.

"If you were in a bind and wanted to submarine, Hal would be the man to see. Good bye, Shayne."

"Thanks."

VI

WHEN HE HUNG up, Mike Shayne realized he finally had a lead to pursue. Hal Mendel, whoever he might be, could lead him to Snappy. But Mendel didn't ring a bell in Mike's memory.

He called the police department and asked for R & I. "Hal Mendel," he told the sergeant who answered. "Shayne calling."

"Yes sir. Hold on a minute."

It was ten minutes before Sergeant Saunders came back on the line. "It isn't much," he confessed, "but Hal Mendel is also known as Henry Myers. He hasn't much of a record. Booked twice in Miami Beach for bookmaking. Copped a plea both times. We have mug shots. No known address. You trying to find this character, Mr. Shayne?"

"That's the idea," Shayne said.

"What took me so long, I asked Kramer a few questions. He was the booking officer last time we had the pleasure of Mendel's company. Kramer says you might find him at Everglades Real Estate. Last we heard, he's in charge of property rentals over there."

"Got it," Mike Shayne said. "Thanks."

Before launching the search, Shayne stopped at Lucy's apartment building.

"Lucy's in the hospital and I need to get a few things from her apartment," he explained to her landlady, Mrs. Crimmins.

"What's happened to the poor girl?" Mrs. Crimmons asked.

"It's in the paper," Shayne said. "She was shot last night at the *Welcome Dead* concert."

"Oh, my God!" Mrs. Crimmins' hands jumped to her throat. "Who would do a thing like that?"

"We'll find out," he promised. "Will you let me into her apartment?"

"The poor dear! Is she going to live?"

"We're pretty sure she will,"

he said. "Will you please let me into her apartment?"

"You should take better care of that girl, Mr. Shayne."

"Yes, ma'am." Shayne sighed and waited.

"You men are all alike," Mrs. Crimmins told him. "No appreciation of a good woman.

"Yes, ma'am." Mike was resigned. "Never mind the passkey, Mrs. Crimmins. I'll manage."

"When will Miss Hamilton be coming home?" the woman asked.

Shayne ignored her question and headed for the elevator. When it had reached the third floor, he planted a match folder to hold the door slightly open, gambling the garrulous Mrs. Crimmins wouldn't pant up the four flights of stairs to interrupt him. He then picked the lock of Lucy's apartment.

In her overnight case, he packed three lacy nightgowns, undergarments, toothbrush, toothpaste and such cosmetics as he thought she might want. Then he made a quick check of Lucy's desk in the living room, seeking some clue to Daniel Baldwin. There was none on or in the neatly ordered desk.

When he returned to the elevator, Mrs. Crimmons had just heaved her considerable bulk into the corridor behind him. She paused to get her breath. "The elevator—is out of order—Mr. Shayne," she panted.

Mike was tempted to leave her stranded but thought better of it. "I've fixed it," he told her, and held the door until she could join him.

"You tell Miss Lucy to get well real soon," she said as they returned to the main floor. "She's the nicest tenant I have, Mr. Shayne."

"I'll do that," he promised.

"Didn't you want to get into her apartment?" Mrs. Crimmins asked.

"Changed my mind, Mrs. Crimmins," he said, picking up Lucy's overnight case. "See you around."

"You remember to tell Miss Lucy to get well real soon," Mrs. Crimmins called after Shayne.

A phone call to Everglades Real Estate brought Hal Mendel on the line. "I'm interested in a rental," Shayne told him.

"You've come to the right party." Mendel spoke in a brisk cheerful voice. "What did you have in mind?"

Across from the phone booth the redhead chose rose an empty three-story factory building with a FOR RENT sign put up by the Everglades Real Estate company. He gave Mendel the address. "Can you meet me here in fifteen minutes?" he asked.

"Of course. Where will you be?"

"Waiting for you on the sidewalk," Shayne told him.

"I'll be there in ten minutes," Mendel said.

He was as good as his word. From a company car, a dapper little man stepped out, dressed in a mod suit with broad tapering lapels and a vest. The detective estimated his age at pushing forty despite the youthfulness of his garb.

"This is a fine property, sir." With a flourish, Mendel flashed a ring of keys and selected the right one. The door opened into a dusty space that had been the factory office. A battered file cabinet and a broken desk were all the furnishings the former renter had left behind.

Inside, Mendel asked, "May I have your name, sir?"

"Mike Shayne."

"Ah, yes. And who do you represent?" Mendel asked.

With his foot, Shayne slammed the door shut behind them. "Myself, Mendel. I want information, and I intend to get it the easy way or the hard way."

Mendel's chubby face blanched. "Are you holding me up?" he asked in a quavering voice.

The redhead ignored the question. "Where is Snappy hiding out?"

"I . . . I don't understand."

Shayne grabbed the fashionable lapels and hoisted Mendel to his toes. "Address," he snapped.

"I don't know any . . . what did you call him?" Mendel quavered.

"Snappy."

"You're mussing my suit, sir," Mendel blustered.

Mike Shayne spun Mendel around and jerked off his coat. Holding it as if he were stalking a bull, the detective edged the little man into a corner.

"How much did you pay for this suit?" He asked.

"Three fifty."

"All right. If you give me the address I want, I won't hand this jacket back to you in two piecs." He held it up, ready to tear.

"*Don't do that!*" Mendel begged.

"Where do I find Snappy?"

Mendel mumbled an address. It was only a block from Shayne's East Flagler Street office.

"Don't let him know I told you," Mendel begged.

"I won't," the redhead promised. "Now take off your shoes, socks, and pants."

"What are you going to do to me?" Mendel asked, bug-eyed with fear. "You some kind of pervert?"

Shayne laughed, but it was not a pleasant laugh. "I just want to make very sure you don't make a phone call," he said. "It's either shoes, socks and pants, or you go with me at gunpoint to explain to Snappy how I found him.

Mendel unbuckled his belt. Fear of Shayne had begun to fade. "Who are you?" Mendel asked.

Mike Shayne offered the man one of his business cards. When

he had turned over his pants, socks and shoes, he took it gingerly between a thumb and forefinger.

"Oh, you're a private gumshoe," Mendel said. "Haven't I read something about you?"

"You may have," Shayne admitted. "Car keys?"

"In the car."

"Careless," the redhead said. "I'll mail them to you."

"What about my clothes?" Mendel asked.

"I'll mail them, too," Shayne told him. "Don't catch cold, Mendel, and I do like those floral shorts." He handed the man his coat, after carefully smoothing the rumpled lapels. "See you around."

"Shayne?" Mendel stopped the detective at the door.

"What is it?"

"Those loafers cost me a hundred dollars," the man said.

Shayne studied the shoes. "Nice," he commented. "I'll have them shined."

"How do I get out of here?" Mendel asked.

"Wait until dark," Mike Shayne said. "I hope you don't get picked up for indecent exposure."

Mendel shrugged philosophically. "My astrologer said this wouldn't be one of my better days."

"Pay better attention to him," Mike counseled.

Driving back to East Flagler Street, Mike Shayne decided it was not coincidence that Snappy had gone to ground so close to his office. His quarry was armed and alert. But the redhead didn't even consider calling Will Gentry. He had prowled too long as a lone wolf.

He parked a block from the address Mendel had given him and inspected the cheap rooming house on foot. It was vacant and for rent according to the Everglades Real Estate sign.

It was a three-story frame building badly in need of paint. Where in that building would Snappy be hiding out?

Just about anywhere.

He patted his shoulder-holstered Colt .45. It was noon. Would Snappy take a chance and go down the street to a restaurant or diner? The redhead thought not.

He lounged in a doorway across the street from the rooming house. Was Snappy really in there? There was only one way to find out. He slipped around to the alley behind the house.

Wooden porches ran across the back of the vacant rooming house at each floor level. Shayne decided to start on the third floor and work down to the basement, so he started up the rickety stairs. When he reached the third floor porch, it took him a moment to pick the doorlock into an empty, echoing hallway.

He drew and cocked his .45. He kicked off his loafers and began the silent stalk. He passed

the half-open door of a dark closet, intent on the room at the front end of the hall. He had picked up the music, turned way down, from a transistor radio.

"All right, big man." The tenor voice behind him froze Shayne in his tracks. "Very slowly, lean over and place that cannon in your fist on the floor."

Mike did as he was told.

"Come into my parlor said the spider to the fly." The high-pitched voice taunted Shayne.

VII

SHAYNE SLOWLY turned to find himself looking at a small-boned slender man in a conservative pinstripe suit, wearing a gray snap-brim hat Mike usually associated with late-late-show gangster movies.

The hand leveling a long-barrel .22 automatic with a silencer screwed onto the muzzle was rock-steady, but the pupils of the man's eyes were black pinpoints. While Mike Shayne watched, he fished a red capsule from his pocket and tossed it into his mouth. Speed.

Shayne had always shunned narcotics of any kind, even had what Lucy called a blue-nosed attitude toward smoking marijuana. But he was well versed with the effects of Red Devils and the other uppers on the human body. Nitroglycerine assured Snappy of an almost instantaneous new high, eclipsing the one he had already achieved. When the full effect hit his nervous system, his finger would crook on the trigger.

Addicts, Shayne knew, compared killing under the influence of Speed more satisfying than a sexual orgasm.

"Try another," the redhead said quietly.

Snappy's hand dipped into the side pocket of his suitcoat..

Mike Shayne's long red leg shot up and his foot kicked the .22 aside. He followed through the kick. His toe caught Snappy under the chin, snapping his head back.

Shayne embraced the staggered man in a bear hug, easily lifted him off his feet, turning to slam him against the wall. The force of the impact showered them both with plaster from the cracked ceiling of the hallway.

Involuntarily, Shayne glanced up. It was a mistake. He had forgotten that Speed discharges a jolt of adrenalin into the addict's blood that can give him nearly superhuman strength for a few short moments.

Snappy burst from Mike's arms. Bouncing off the opposite wall, he lunged into Shayne's chest, flattening him against the wall this time, and small chunks of plaster again showered down.

The redhead's instinctive swing at Snappy's jaw grazed the man's shoulder. A wild swing hit Shayne's cheek. The explosive force of the blow was out of all

proportion to the size of the man who had thrown it.

For a moment Mike Shayne was stunned. But he twisted to avoid the sharp knee-drive at his groin. He managed to butt Snappy's face, heard the crackling of breaking nose bones.

Mike Shayne squared off in a wrestler's crouch to deal with the next headling rush. It didn't come. Snapy went to his knees to snatch up his .22.

.One knee was on Mike's .45.

Mike Shayne dropped to the floor as the automatic popped like a cork being pulled from a bottle. He rolled when the weapon popped again and the bullet splintered the floor where Mike had just been.

Snappy shifted his weight to follow Shayne with the .22. As he did so, his knee slid off the .45 and, for a moment, disturbed his balance just enough to speed the third shot into the baseboard an inch above Shayne's head.

Pushing himself up, the detective pounced and flattened Snapy before he could get off a fourth shot. He jerked both of the man's arms behind his back in a double hammerlock. He felt the surge of strength in the slender body between his knees vanish as quickly as it had come.

He sucked in a deep breath. Blood from a ring-cut on his cheekbone dripped from his chin. He shifted Snappy's wrists so he could grip them with one large hand, then fished a handkerchief from the breast pocket of his plaid sports coat to dab at the cut.

"Okay, Friend Spider," he said. "Let's have a chat."

Letting go the man's wrists, Mike Shayne got both .45 and .22, then rose to his feet.

Snappy sat up, braced himself, shook his head to clear it. Shayne helped him to his feet, then ordered, "Against the wall, and spread."

Snappy did so. Shayne gave him a quick but thorough frisk, lifting a loaded Derringer and ten Red Devils from one coat pocket, a stoppered vial of cyanide from the other and a six-inch stiletto from a sheath strapped around the man's left calf.

"That's your hidey hole?" The redhead asked, nodding toward the room at the end of the corridor from which there drifted the soft strains of hi-fi classical music.

Snappy nodded. Shayne prodded him toward it with his .45. "Let's go."

There were only a cot, a side table and an easy chair with a threadbare slipcover in the room. The transistor lay on the side table.

Mike Shayne pushed Snappy into the chair, gave him the already blood-stained handkerchief to staunch the flow of blood from his smashed nose—then settled on the edge of the lumpy bed.

"I guess you know me without

a formal introduction," he told Snappy amiably.

"Yes." The word came through the handkerchief pressed to Snappy's nose as if there were glue in his throat. There was a bubbling sound in his nose every time he breathed.

"Who put out the contract on me?" the detective asked.

Snappy mumbled an obscene suggestion.

Shayne studied the man in the chair.

"Well, I'll tell you what we do," he said. "We'll take you to jail and try the cold turkey cure for Speed addiction."

Bloodshot eyes glared at him over the handkerchief. "Bad luck to leave your hat on the bed," Shayne said and settled the snap-brim on Snappy's head. "Come on, let's go."

He pulled Snappy up out of the chair, and poked his spine with the .45. The next thing he knew, the man arched his back, uttering a strangled sound. Then he sank to his knees, clutching at his left arm, to topple over on his side, his eyes bulging.

For a moment, Shayne thought he had somehow downed a cyanide dose, but suddenly realized he was watching a heart attack. Mouth to mouth resuscitation wasn't any good.

The detective found himself alone with a dead man. He swore.

Shayne went back for his loafers, then hoisted Snappy's limp body over his shoulder and began tramping down the three flights of stairs. Out on the street, he trudged to where he had parked his Mercedes.

"It was weird," he told Will Gentry later. "There I was, walking along East Flagler in an early afternoon crowd, and no one said a word about the corpse over my shoulder. Sure, they looked, and some were bugeyed, but they must have thought Snappy was a dummy, or that we were pulling off a bizarre stunt. I tell you, Will, who can figure people?"

When he had deactivated the electronic locks, he propped Snappy in the back seat, the hat tipped over his eyes, and drove to police headquarters.

There he did get immediate attention when he stalked into the detective's section and laid Snappy on a bench. Beside the body he laid out the lethal articles he had frisked from the late Snappy and put the silenced .22 on the dead man's chest.

He straightened and faced the ring of goggle-eyed detectives. "Any questions, fellows?" he asked.

No one spoke.

VIII

SHAYNE SHRUGGED his big shoulders. "I didn't kill this one," he said.

Will Gentry, chewing on the stub of a cigar, had joined the

circle of detectives. Shayne removed the snap-brim hat he had tipped over the dead man's face.

"Whoever you really are, Snappy, meet Chief Gentry," he said. "Will, this is the little bugger who killed Danny Baldwin and wounded Lucy."

"He looks the worse for wear, Mike," Gentry said. "What did you do to him?"

"We had a roughhouse after he tried to blow me away in a vacant boarding house on East Flagler," Shayne said, "but the coroner will call it a cardiac arrest." The redhead raised his right hand. "Scout's honor, Will, I tried to bring him in alive, even tried mouth to mouth."

"Let's talk about it in my office," Gentry told Shayne and turned to the gaping detectives. "Matinee is over, men," he snapped. "Get this garbage to the morgue and call the coroner. We're running a cop-shop here. Remember?"

Tim Rourke was lurking in the hall outside the detectives' section. A *Daily News* photographer was at his elbow. "What's coming down?" he asked Shayne and Gentry.

Will Gentry groaned. "You and that man with a picture box are all I need to make my day, Rourke." He stabbed a finger at the photographer. "Send him away."

"Give me a reason." Rourke smelled an exclusive and was going to be stubborn.

"*Damn it!*" Gentry exploded. "This is *my* turf."

A detective picked that moment to inform Gentry they had sent for an ambulance to take Snappy to the morgue.

Shayne had watched the two men spar with some amusement. "Rourke comes bringing information, Will," he said now. "Let's deal him into what we have." He turned to the tall reporter. "For the time being, that's a suspect they're going to wheel out of here, Tim."

"Right," Gentry agreed quickly.

Tim turned to his photographer. "No pictures," he said. "Go back to your playpen at the office—and keep your mouth shut."

The photographer closed his Speed Graphic and thumbed his nose at the three men. When he had left, Tim threw an arm over Gentry's shoulders, the other across Shayne's. "Let us sit down and reason together, gentlemen," he said. "You two have some method in persuading me that was a suspect and not a corpse in the detectives' squadroom. The *Daily News* never lies to its loyal readers. We do sometimes shade the truth, but only in a good cause."

Gentry grunted. "At times, I could be persuaded to like this news snoop," he told Shayne.

"I'm an acquired taste, Chief," Rourke said smugly.

Behind the closed door in Gentry's office, with incoming calls cut off, Tim became serious. "Michael here asked me to squeeze my street people," he said. "Your people have been active, too," he told Gentry. "We share some of the same snitches. Let's compare notes."

"Fair enough," Gentry agreed. "Our suspect out there is a free-lance. He's a very lethal S.O.B. —or was."

Tim shot an inquiring look at Mike. "Cardiac arrest," the big detective told him. "He was popping Red Devils and we scuffled."

"And that's all we have so far." Gentry told him.

"You're not going to like what *I've* found out," Tim warned Gentry. "One of your vice cops bought twenty-five Red Devils the other day for a friend. Real uppers, 25 percent nitro."

Gentry turned beet red. "'Can you prove that and give me a name?'"

Tim shook his head. "Neither," he said. "I can say this friend was from out of town and didn't have a regular source. Your man was his local contact. That's all I have, Chief."

"You sure?" Gentry asked.

"That I know more than I've told you?"

"Right."

"I'm sure," Tim said. "If I had a name, I'd give it to Internal Affairs."

"Give me the name of your snitch," Gentry told Tim.

"Can't," Tim said. "You know better than to ask."

"Now look here," Gentry said. "You're accusing one of my men of being into this thing, maybe setting it up. I can book you . . ."

"Hold it, fellows," Mike Shayne said. "Will, your IA division is good enough to find out if a vice cop laid out for two tickets to that concert. I'll bet they know what you had for breakfast."

"If they don't, I'll kick some butts," Gentry replied. "Thanks for telling me how to do my job," he added with an edge of sarcasm to Shayne. "I must be getting senile."

"What's with Chicago?" Shayne asked.

"Nothing yet." Gentry admitted it glumly. "The connected boys you mentioned out there are sitting down to a love feast and their cohorts have stopped showing up in the drainage canal."

"Interesting," Mike Shayne said. "What do we know about Cousin Danny?"

"I've established his ID. Daniel Baldwin, Macon, Georgia."

"That's it?" Mike asked.

Gentry nodded. "The Macon P.D. will have more later today.

"So what can I print?" Tim Rourke asked. "I have a deadline."

"Suspect is in custody," Gentry said. "You have that from a reli-

able source within my department."

"Suspect is talking," the redhead said. "You also have that from a reliable source, and share it with the wire services, Tim. That's important. Will, what about your gumshoes who saw me bring him in?"

Gentry reached for the phone on his desk. "There will be no blabber-mouthing," he promised. "Especially insofar as my vice squad is concerned."

I hope you're right," Mike Shayne said.

In the parking lot, Tim said, "How did you track down this suspect?"

"I got a tip," Shayne said.

Tim studied his friend. "You know I've just blown a front page by-line with pictures, don't you? I'm going to lie in print to *Daily News* readers, and one of Gentry's detectives is going to leak the inside story to my competition. At least ten plainclothes cops saw you lug in a body, Irish. If you think Gentry can gag them, you believe in Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy."

"Handle it this way, Tim. Say it's rumored that the suspect is dead, but a usually reliable source informs you he isn't."

Tim was thoughtful. "Usually reliable informs this reporter that suspect has given P.D. valuable information."

"You've got it," the redhead said.

"What's your next move?" Tim asked. "Off the record, of course."

Shayne turned grim and dangerous. "I want a few words with that vice cop."

"There's a tall and very dangerous Black over in Miami called Bobo," Tim told him. "Does business from a Rolls Royce in the Clover Garage. Red Devils, among a few other mind-bending items, are his business. Business is very brisk."

"Thanks."

"So I've blown that source," Tim told Shayne. "Who tipped you where to find our suspect?"

"Try Hal Mendel at Everglades Real Estate Company in Miami. Ask him to find you a nice cozy hideout for a few days."

"I'll do that," Tim said.

"You can return his shoes and pants," Shayne told him, "but I promised to have the shoes shined, and you might as well have the pants pressed."

Shayne left Rourke to think about that while he got the shoes and pants from his new Mercedes.

"Is this guy going to be glad to see me?" Tim asked cautiously.

"He'll love your sad face on sight," the redhead assured the reporter.

"Bobo's office hours are ten to midnight," Tim told him. "You'll have to stand in line with the local street pushers."

"You have some nice sources."

"I don't steal their clothes,"

Tim retorted. "You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

IX

THE REDHEAD drove to the hospital. He was permitted to go up to Lucy's private room, although she remained in a coma, and found Officer Osborne reading a magazine. He was sitting in a straight-backed chair beside the door.

"Mr. Shayne." Osborne put aside the magazine and stood up. "Are you having any luck?"

"Some," Shayne said. "Has she had any visitors?"

'You're the first since I came on duty at noon," Osborne said.

"How come Gentry made you a watchdog? I thought you had a partner and were in a black and white?"

"Asked for it," Osborne said. "I got an interest in this case."

The detective entered the room, but came back to stick his head through the doorway. "Ever worked Vice, Osborne?" he asked.

Officer Osborne made a face. "Not yet and I never will, God willing, if the creek don't rise. Larry says I'm not the type."

"Larry?"

"Yeah—Larry Berrigan. Larry used to be on that sewer detail until Chief Gentry busted him back to patrolman." Osborne grinned. "Larry is a real character."

"I'll just bet he is," Shayne said. "Was there anything odd about you two taking the concert squeal?"

"We were off our regular beat, but closer than Anderson and Terwilliger. Me and Larry were on our lunch break and on their beat, because he likes the cheese sandwiches at Louise's Sandwichtorium, just around the corner from the auditorium. Do you know the joint?"

"I seem to remember seeing it," Shayne said. "Next door to a Texaco station?"

"That's the place." Osborne smiled. "So does Larry order cheese? No, it's got to be pastrami on Jewish rye. I tell him he doesn't play with a full deck."

"Why did Gentry bust him?"

"Larry makes a narco buy and tries to bust the pusher in the men's room over at the bus station, only this pusher is a Fed Narco cop and they beat out each others' brains before they wise up, which blew a Fed investigation that had been going on for six months. So it was back on the street for Larry, with a shave and a haircut. The guy, I tell you, is a laugh a minute."

Shayne shook his head. "I bet the Feds don't buy that."

Osborne sighed. "Those boys got no sense of humor."

Shayne made a mental note to get the real story from Will Gentry. Will, so far as he knew, had never busted any of his men

for making an honest mistake.

He found Lucy as beautiful as ever, but still in a coma. He consulted with the surgeon who had done the operation about getting another opinion, and suggested Will Gentry's son, Ralph.

"He's the best," the surgeon told him, "but very expensive."

"Get him," Mike Shayne said.

IX

GENTRY TOLD Shayne that the Macon P.D. had confirmed Daniel Baldwin's identity and learned that he was a bachelor shoe salesman for International Leather Company, just transferred from the West Coast.

"And here's one for the book," Will said. "Whoever boosted his billfold mailed it in to the department, ID and credit cards intact so far as we can tell. No cash, but an I.O.U. for $164.00. Some dip out there has a sense of humor." Gentry added, "Where are you calling from?"

"A diner called Louise's Sandwichtorium. Why did you bust Larry Berrigan off Vice and into a black and white?"

There was a pause before Gentry said, "You do get around, don't you?"

"I know about the Fed Narco cop and their little misunderstanding," Mike said.

"Berrigan had illusions of grandeur," Gentry told him. "He thought he was a one man Vice squad. I'll bring him up again when he gets his head together. He's a screwball but a good man."

"Somebody in Vice isn't," the redhead reminded Gentry."

"Internal Affairs is working on that, Mike."

"Include Berrigan in the investigation," Shayne said.

"Want to give me a reason?" Gentry asked.

"He says he likes cheese sandwiches but orders pastrami," Shayne told Gentry. "Louise prides herself on her cheese sandwiches."

"Well, *damn!*" Gentry sighed. "Ask a foolish question . . ."

"Hold your breath, Will," Shayne told him. "I may be able to give you the name of your crooked Vice cop."

"You better be damned sure you're right," Chief Gentry said.

Mike Shayne next placed a credit-card call to Chicago to talk with his contact there on the Arson squad of the Fire Department.

"A favor, O'Brien," he said. "You have good P.D. contacts—Eddie Ferguson, Carmen Guido and Jerry Brannigan."

"Yeah. Our Unholy Three," Clarence O'Brien said. "What about them?"

"Which one might be taking a hurry-up Miami Beach vacation. Can you do it? It's just a wild hunch that might amount to nothing."

"I'll try," O'Brien promised. "Call me tomorrow."

Shayne checked into a dingy hot-bed motel over in Miami before he found the Clover Garage on a musty back street. From the motel, he took a cab, leaving his Mercedes in the motel parking space in front of his unit.

The garage was closed but a burly white with a shaved bullet head lounged in the office doorway.

"I want to see Bobo," the redhead said.

"Go to hell, Shayne," the guard snarled. "You ain't seeing nobody here."

"Fixed any good fights lately, Pug?" Shayne asked. "You're looking out of shape."

Pug cocked a fist. "Want your red head knocked off, Shayne?"

The detective aimed a kick at the man's shins, swung a short uppercut that traveled a scant six inches before his fist exploded under Pug's chin. A left jab straightened up his prey. A hard right hook rocked him. Then a sharp left dropped the big man to his haunches.

"Now we go see Bobo," Shayne said.

Pug's hand dived for the gun in his shoulder holster, but the redhead kicked it out of his hand and pressed his .45 against the middle of the man's forehead.

"March!" he ordered.

"Have a heart!" Pug whined. "Bobo will kill me."

"I'll explain," Shayne promised.

He followed Pug through the dark garage, and up a ramp to the second floor. In a back corner he spotted the Rolls Royce. In the rear seat, the tallest Black Shayne had ever seen was having a drink.

He was resplendent in a green silk suit, yellow shirt and a gray felt hat. The Rolls was ticking over so Bobo could enjoy air-conditioned comfort. Mike saw the glitter of diamond rings as Bobo opened the door car.

"Who is this cat?" he asked Pug in a deep, mellow voice.

"Mike Shayne."

Bobo studied Shayne from head to foot, then spoke to Pug. "You bring me a fly cop. You got more addled brains than I thought, Pug."

The redhead showed the .45 he held pressed against Pug's spine. "I didn't give him a choice."

"Where's your piece?" Bobo asked Pug.

Shayne pulled Pug's automatic from his coat pocket, flipped out the clip, shucked the shell from the firing chamber, handed the weapon back to Pug.

Bobo chuckled. "You hire what you can get these days," he told the detective. "Anybody else do that to Pug, I'd fire him, but I can't expect him to buck a man like you, Shayne, can I?"

"Thanks for the compliment," Shayne said. "Care if I join you

for a drink?"

"What do you want?"

"A name."

"Don't have any of those," Bobo said, "but came aboard and pick your poison." A Gucci loafer kicked up a jump seat. "Rest yourself."

Mike Shayne climbed into the roomy rear compartment and straddled the jump seat. He had holstered his .45. Bobo, Mike discovered, was almost as broad as he was tall. His handsome face was impassive. "You ever seen those James Bond movies?" he asked in a pleasant voice.

"Yeah," Shayne said, mystified.

"Connery had a sharp automobile, man. Now right behind your back, there's a cute little gun. I press a button, you stop breathing." Bobo fingered a button on the seat arm. "What name you want to hear?"

"A Vice cop bought twenty-five Red Devils from you for an out of towner."

"Yeah, he did," Bob acknowledged. "Some cat from Chicago wanted the RDs."

"That cat blew away a man and wounded my secretary at the *Welcome Dead* concert," Shayne said. "I want the name of that "Read in the papers your secretary got hit, and from her picture she's a real foxy dame. The strung-out party who made the mistake is in the slammer. Don't you read Tim Rourke's column?"

"Look and listen, Bobo. The way I see it, this Vice cop set me up to be blown away. A man is dead and my secretary is in a coma, prognosis not too good, but I'm still walking around."

"And hassling me, man."

"Right! So the contract is still out on me. If you were me, what would you do?"

Bobo laughed. "Hassle me."

"I'm going to level about that hitman the cops claim is in the slammer. He isn't. He's in the morgue, toes turned out and a tag on the pig that went to market." Shayne flashed the special deputy badge Will Gentry had given him. "How do they say it?"

"You can talk here or down at the precinct," Bobo said and rolled his eyes. "Lord have mercy! I'd like a dollar for all the times I heard that cop line."

"Let me try a name. Larry Berrigan. Ring a bell?" the redhead asked.

Bobo shook his head. "How about him and the Fed Narc?" The big Black threw his head for a hearty laugh, then was serious. He laid a big hand on Shayne's knee. "Them two just about had me by the short hairs, Shayne. If they hadn't crossed wires, I'd be on my way to the slammer. Best favor I ever got was when Gentry busted Berrigan back to black and white and the Feds shipped their man to Utah."

"So Berrigan is straight?" Mike asked.

Bobo nodded. "When he goes back on Vice I blow this town. Now you come here alone to lean on me and flash a badge. I like to do business one on one. I don't like the smell of the slammer, so I'm going to give you a name."

Shayne tensed.

"Price."

"Douglas Price?" Shayne was incredulous. "The Price who heads up Gentry's Vice squad?"

"Gospel truth," Bobo said, and raised his right hand, diamonds sparkling in the dim interior of the Rolls Royce. "You ain't wired for sound, are you?"

"No." Shayne spread his sports coat. "Frisk me if you want."

"We're one on one," Bobo told him. "I trust you—you trust me. You think I'm doing a number on squeaky-clean Price? I ain't." He spoke with disgust. "Price hates your guts, Shayne."

"I've never crossed him," the redhead protested.

"Don't matter. You and Gentry are buddies. You get mentioned in the papers and he don't. So when he got the chance, he set you up."

"You're sure that hitman came on from Chicago?" Shayne asked.

"I'm sure," Bobo said. "Who sent him is *your* guess. I ain't interested."

Shayne said, "If you ever decide to blow the rackets, come to me for a job, Bobo. We'd make a good team."

"Man, I appreciate that offer," Bobo said. "Pushing junk ain't no bed of roses. But a cat has got to live as high on the hog as he can manage. You got no idea what my expenses are."

"See you around," Shayne said.

"Not this cat you won't!" Bobo told him. "I just blew it. Tomorrow me and these limey wheels is on our way someplace else. Stay alive, Shayne, and I hope your foxy chick makes it." He reached in his breast pocket and produced a sheaf of bills. "Need some bread for her expenses? I gave Price them Red Devils but didn't know he was setting you up."

"I'll manage, Bobo, but I'm obliged," Shayne said.

Bobo didn't put away the money. "I hear you got a thing for crippled children. Me, I don't do business with any pusher who goes after the kiddy trade. My kid brother OD'd when he was ten." He peeled ten hundred-dollar bills from the sheaf and pressed them into Shayne's hand. "Send it in as coming from a friend, Shayne."

Shayne pocketed the money. "Let's put your real name on the contribution."

Bobo hesitated. "Benjamin Oliver Bradshaw Ogden. Ain't that a handle?"

"A big name for a big man, Benjamin," the detective said.

He shook Bobo's huge hand.

"Thanks for your show of confidence."

"Anytime, Mike, anytime."

X

THE NEXT MORNING, from his motel room, Shayne called O'Brien in Chicago. O'Brien gave him two names. The redhead then called Will Gentry.

"We need to talk, Will."

"I'm listening."

"Call me back on an outside phone," Shayne said and hung up after giving Will his number.

"What's coming down?" Gentry asked, five minutes later.

"What does IA know?" Shayne countered.

"Lieutenant Price is working with them on Tim's lead. He's just about to wrap up that cop I busted—Larry Berrigan. What's this got to do with anything?" The chief sounded irritated. "This cloak and dagger routine leaves me a little cold, Mike."

"There's a Chicago hood flying in sometime today," Shayne told him. "It's either Eddie Ferguson or Carmen Guido—my informant couldn't say which. I want him picked up and brought in. Now, about Price—I want him there when the boys bring in the hood. Can you manage this?"

"Yes." Gentry was crisp. "You can make a case?"

"*We* can," Shayne assured him. "Call me at this number when you have it set up. And, Will?"

"Yes?"

* * *

Douglas Price was a spruce, distinguished man in his early forties with an erect military bearing. When the redhead arrived at headquarters, he was chatting with Will Gentry in the Chief's office. Price rose to grasp Shayne's hand in a firm grip.

"Welcome to our side of the law, Shayne, if only for a short time," Price said with false heartiness. "Understand you have something for us."

Gentry, watching the two men, pressed a buzzer button on his desk.

Shayne settled in a chair, an arm hooked over the back, his hands clasped. "Spoke with a friend of yours last night, Lieutenant Price," he said.

"Oh? Who was that?"

Shayne didn't have a chance to answer because Eddie Ferguson, handcuffed, was thrust through the doorway of the office and the door shut behind him.

Ferguson was a short, spindly little man with a face of an angry terrier.

"What the hell is this all about?" he demanded to know, not yet noticing Price. His anger was focussed on Chief Gentry. "I want to call my attorneys and do it right now. My civil rights are being violated."

Gentry's eyebrows rose. "Is that so? Have we booked you for anything?"

"Well, not yet. But if you think . . . " Ferguson saw Price staring at him. Only then did he notice Mike Shayne. "You son of a bitch!" he spat at Shayne.

Shayne smiled. "Hello again, Eddie. With all the doves flying over the Loop, did you think I'd get word back to Carmen Guido that you asked me to cancel him out?"

Ferguson's lips settled into a firm line.

Shayne nodded at Ferguson. "You two have met," he told Price. "Eddie, the hitman you sent down, has been busy talking to us," he told Ferguson. "We know you had Price try and set me up with those concert tickets." He addressed himself to Lieutenant Price, who had paled. "Twenty-five Red Devils — Bobo has been talking, Price."

Gentry's usually pleasant face was a granite mask. "You should have paid for those concert tickets instead of putting an arm on the promoters, Price," he said. "You blew it right there. Internal Affairs hadn't included Mr. Squeaky Clean in their investigation until you called this morning, Mike."

Price, on his feet, went for the gun in his shoulder holster, his eyes blazing fury. Mike Shayne, on his feet, took Ferguson by the shoulders, swinging him into the line of fire.

Two bullets slammed into the handcuffed gangster before the redhead could dodge around him and knock up Price's gun arm. The third shot from the automatic chipped plaster from the ceiling of Chief Gentry's office.

Shayne's roundhouse swing knocked Price all the way across the office, slamming him into a wall. Eyes rolling upward, Price collapsed. Shayne picked up the weapon he had dropped and placed it on Gentry's desk.

Ferguson was down, groaning, with one bullet in his right shoulder, another in his left buttock. Mike Shayne knelt beside the prone man to check his wounds. "You'll live, Eddie," he said, and looked up at Will Gentry. "Case closed. Want your badge back?"

Will sighed. "If you please."

At the hospital Shayne found Lucy sitting up in bed. "Where were you during visiting hours, Michael?" she asked him. "Fine friend you turned out to be!"

"Busy, Angel." he brushed a kiss on her cheek. "How do you feel?"

Lucy smiled. "I can go home tomorrow. I have to get that check off to the school, and then there's corospondence that's been piling up, and after that we've got to find . . . "

"Shut *up!*" Mike Shayne sat on the bed and took her in his arms.

The Silenced Partner

by PETER CHARLES

The Heirs to Beane & Thurlow Desperately Needed a Business Bail-out — and in Arthur They Had a Perfect Fall Guy. Or Did They?

THE EXECUTIVE office of Beane & Thurlow was paneled in walnut, furnished in leather and dominated by matching oil portraits of the late Elton Thurlow, Sr., and Roderick Beane, co-founders of the firm, who gazed austerely at each other from the long walls.

It was only Herbert Beane's fancy, of course, that the portraits had, over the past few years, developed expressions of steadily mounting outrage in ratio with the firm's steadily shrinking profits.

Normally a cheerful, ruddy-complexioned man inclined to stoutness, Herbert was morose as he stared into his scotch and water and murmured, "So it's all down the drain, is it?"

"That's the way it looks," sighed Elton Thurlow, Jr., at the massive desk with his head in his hands. He ran lean, sensitive fingers through grey-templed hair and looked at his partner with mild, ingenuous blue eyes. "If only you'd consulted me before borrowing fifty thousand dollars from that Sicilian gentleman, Herbert."

"But, Elton, you yourself pointed out that the option on that electronic firm's stock seemed an excellent buy, almost certain to quadruple our investment in a matter of weeks. And with all our other lines of credit committed—well. I never dreamed Mr. Catanio would turn so nasty about it."

"Faults on both sides, my dear Herbert," said Elton, soothingly. "The point is, Mr. Catanio now wants seventy-five thousand dollars within the month, or a controlling interest in Beane & Thurlow. One alternative seems impossible, and the other distasteful." He sighed. "I wonder what Father would have done?"

"Mine, or yours?"

"Either one."

"They would have taken a horsewhip to Mr. Catanio and badgered J.P. Morgan or somebody for another credit extension and then pulled something out of the hat. Life," said Herbert, heading for the liquor cabinet to recharge his glass, "was certainly simpler in their day."

A gloomy silence settled over the office.

"I say, *Herbert!*" There was a note of excitement in Elton's tone. "Here's something interesting."

"What?"

"This partnership insurance agreement. I had Arthur dig it out on the off-chance we might borrow something on it."

"Can we?"

"No."

"Then what . . .?"

"Did you know that the policy is on the partnership itself—no individual names mentioned. All it says is that in the event of the death of one of the partners, the sum of seventy-five thousand dollars will be paid to the partnership. Isn't that odd?"

"Perhaps—but remember," Herbert added "if you're going to suggest that I hurl myself out some window so you can get the money to pay Mr. Catanio, forget it."

"Not you, my dear Herbert."

Herbert sat up, blinking. "*You,* old chap? I say, that's quite decent of you."

"Certainly not." Elton leaned back in the swivel chair,

"I was wondering if this might not be the occasion to take someone else into the partnership."

"Someone else?"

"Arthur Winters, for example."

"Arthur? But Arthur must be a thousand years old.

"Exactly! Don't you think his devotion to duty should be rewarded—and quickly? He may not be a thousand years old, but he *is* seventy-two, and who knows how many years he may have left?"

"Jove, *yes!*" said Herbert. "Or months."

"Or days."

"Elton, you are a cagey chap!" said Herbert, admiringly.

They both moved to the liquor cabinet, and presently the executive office found itself restored to its customary jovial atmosphere.

THE ANNOUNCEMENT that Beane & Thurlow would henceforth be known as Beane, Thurlow & Winters surprised almost everyone in the business community, excepting Arthur Winters himself. A thin, pale man of medium height, for whom the word "tidy" might expressly have been invented, Mr. Winters terminated in a head of snow-white hair, not one wisp of which ever turned,

Though he may have blinked

once or twice behind his steel-rimmed glasses, his only other acknowledgement of his sudden elevation to the partnership was a twitch of his thin lips that might have been construed as a smile.

"Now let me see," said Elton on the afternoon a few days later when an involved but hasty ritual of paper-signing had made Mr. Winters a legal partner. "Why don't you take my old office for your own? It's been vacant since I moved into Father's, and it has a lovely view of the river."

"Very well," said Mr. Winters. "And I'll need a few things."

"*Anything!*" cried Herbert. He whirled round from the liquor cabinet, and a bottle slipped from his hand and sailed toward the older gentleman's head. Mr. Winters fielded it neatly and handed it back.

"Beg your pardon. Run out and get whatever you need. Charge it to the firm. Just make sure it's on a thirty-day return basis."

"Why is that, Mr. B—I mean, Herbert?"

"In case it doesn't suit, my dear Arthur."

"I already have a set of desk pens," said Mr. Winters, proudly. "The staff presented it. I'll take it along and have it monogrammed." Elton clucked his tongue. "I shouldn't rush into any monograms, Arthur," he advised. "Think on it for a while." He ushered him out with a pat on the shoulder and turned back to Herbert. "Well, that's that!"

"For now," said Herbert, darkly. He picked up a paperweight from Thurlow's desk and juggled it in a preoccupied manner.

"What do you mean?"

"I've never paid too much attention to Arthur before . . . didn't realize he was such a wiry little chap. Looks the sort who might go to a hundred and five—and then be shot by a jealous husband. I wish we could've got someone sicklier."

"Nonsense! Arthur's a pefect choice—logical, too. You noticed how he handled himself when Seligmann interviewed him for that business page feature story the other day? Most adroit."

"Oh, I'm sure Arthur knows as much about the business as we do. Still, he *is* healthier than an old duffer ought to be, for our purposes."

"The state of his health doesn't really enter into it, my good fellow. The policy pays off for accidental death, and the possibilities are simply limitless, as a glance at any newspaper will tell you. People are getting bowled over by produce trucks and falling down manholes and tumbling down stairs at a tremendous rate.

"Yesterday, I read of a suburban housewife who managed, Lord knows how, to dispose of herself in an automatic washer-dryer combination. Certainly Arthur has as good a chance of being struck

by a falling cornice as anyone."

"And if he doesn't—?"

"Ah," said Elton, reflectively. "I suppose if nothing happens to Arthur in the normal course of events in the next couple of weeks, something will have to be arranged."

"Do you suppose that if we discussed it with Mr. Catanio . . . ?"

Elton paled. "Don't even *think* such a thing, Hebert. I feel that Mr. Catanio would never let us hear the end of it. No, what I had in mind was that warehouse property of ours over in Newton, in the industrial park—the place that was condemned several years ago."

Herbert brightened. "The very thing! I say, look down there." He leaned out the window. "Isn't that Arthur, just coming out the door? Seems to be looking for a cab."

"Where?" Elton, too, leaned out to see. "Put that paperweight down, Herbert, before you drop it."

Herbert set the paperweight on the sill, but somehow his elbow jostled if off. With a smothered cry, he snatched vainly after it, then watched as it crashed to the sidewalk within a yard of Arthur Winters. The two partners hastily drew back into the office, Herbert catching the back of his head a nasty crack on the window-frame.

"That was most careless of you, Herbert!" said Elton.

"You mean I should have been a little more to the left. Well, possibly." Herbert peered out of the window once more. "He's crossing the street to the cab stand. *Oh*-oh! There's a pickup truck bearing down on him! Look at him hopping back and forth! Elton, I can't look!"

The sound of screeching tires and a crash wafted up from the street as Elton dashed to the window to take up the report.

"*Faugh!*" he said. "Never laid a wheel on him—ran into a push-cart. Arthur's getting into a cab. There he goes. *Damnation!* Now what?" He turned to snap a toggle switch on the intercom, which had been buzzing fretfully for some moments. "Yes?"

"A Mr. Catanio on the telephone, Mr. Thurlow," said the intercom. "Will you take the call?"

THE NEXT TEN days or so saw a remarkable change in Herbert Beane's waistline and in his manner as well. The former shrank by inches; the latter became more and more nervous. No physical effects were noted as far as Elton was concerned, except that his secretary complained of a greater than usual tendency to wander off into contemplative silences in the middle of dictation. At length there came an afternoon when Herbert burst into Elton's office, headed straight to the liquor

cabinet and polished off a stiff drink in two gulps.

"You know, I can't stand much more of this," he stated, turning red-rimmed eyes to Elton, who jumped up to close the door. "He's out. Left a couple of hours ago. Did you notice his new attache case? Genuine morocco. And his suit? Two hundred and fifty dollars if it cost a nickel.

"And did you know he's moving out of the Y.M.C.A. and into that new condominium overlooking the park? And the day before yesterday I caught him looking in the window of the Rolls-Royce agency. You don't suppose he's getting ready to—"

Elton shuddered. "I heard him talking about rolls the other day, but merely assumed he was ordering lunch. Herbert, something must be done!"

"I've tried," said Herbert, somewhat indistinctly. He was sucking the knuckles of his right hand, which he had barked on the bookcase in an impassioned gesture. "I followed him down to the waterfront the other night, after telling him he was to meet a client there.

"Then I went up to the biggest, ugliest, meanest-looking bruiser I could find and asked him to keep an eye on Arthur, because he had two thousand dollars in cash in his briefcase. Then I left, feeling reasonably certain the next we'd hear of Arthur was when someone fished his corpse out of the river."

"Evidently something went wrong."

Herbert snorted. "Arthur trotted in the next morning, chipper as a squirrel. It turned out that of all the incipient assassins at hand, I'd chosen a plainclothes man who was guarding the docks against pilferage. He not only guarded Arthur as well, but gave him a ride home in a police car."

"Frustrating!" said Elton.

Both men leaped galvanically as the telephone rang. "Mr. Catanio?" Herbert wondered aloud. Elton hushed him with a gesture and picked up the instrument.

"Elton Thurlow speaking. Who is—? Yes, we have an Arthur Winters in our firm. What's that? Yes, he did own a morocco attache case, but may I ask wh— Merciful *heavens!* An explosion on the ferry?"

Herbert, his eyes shining, tried to press his ear to the receiver. Elton tilted it so both could hear. "Yes, yes, I understand. Certainly. We'll take care of everything. Thank you, officer.

"That," he said, cradling the phone, "was someone from the harbor police. It seems there was a boiler explosion or something on a ferry boat about an hour ago—dozens of people killed or blown into the water. Arthur must have been aboard for some reason, because they found his attache case floating amongst the wreckage—but no trace of him among

the survivors."

Herbert's eyes glistened. "Good old Arthur! Elton, old man, he's *done* it. We're *saved!*"

The partners linked arms in an impromptu Morris dance, which ended when Herbert whacked his ankle on a table leg and collapsed into the settee with a blissful smile, while Elton carried on for a few more steps to his desk, where he picked up the phone book. "The insurance company," he said. "They'll have to be notified at once."

Then the door burst open and Arthur Winters reeled in, clad in his underwear and a ratty-looking grey blanket, with a twist of grapefruit rind hanging over one ear.

"What a perfectly beastly day!" said Arthur.

It was several moments before Elton found his voice. "Arthur, my dear fellow! What on earth happened? We just heard about the accident—thought you were lost to us forever!"

"It was dreadful—simply dreadful!" Arthur sat down beside Herbert, the bit of grapefruit rind falling unheeded to the carpet. "I was trapped on the stern with another gentleman when something blew up. No warning whatever.

"One minute we were talking and the next I was alone in the water, floundering about, and then someone hauled me aboard a passing garbage scow. I would have been back sooner," he finished, "but we had to come back by way of the municipal incinerator."

"What absolutely frightful luck!" cried Herbert. "Frightfully good, I mean, of course."

"Indeed, *indeed!*" Their arms around Arthur's shoulders, Elton and Herbert exchanged glances. "We couldn't do without you, Arthur," said Elton. "Especially since we need your opinion on some property of ours, over in Newton. Why don't you take the rest of the day off. Rest up—and we'll plan on taking a little trip over there tomorrow."

THE EXPEDITION to Newton could not have been called an unqualified success, involving as it did another trip by ferry, which Arthur Winters greeted with understandable reluctance. It took considerable persuasion and several references to sense of duty to get him aboard and, once embarked, he spent the whole trip on the open upper deck, on the edge of a folding chair with his eyes closed and his hands grasping the chair seat, as though poised for instant flight.

Once across the river, however, he relaxed visibly. By the time their taxi deposited them at the warehouse door, Arthur Winters was in a cheerful frame of mind that even the depressing atmosphere failed to dampen.

"As I recall," he said, his voice echoing in the vast room, "your father—Mr. Roderick Beane, that is—acquired this in lieu of moneys owed when the Pinchley Moving & Storage Company went bankrupt."

"And here it's sat ever since," said Elton dolefully, "gathering dust and taxes. And rats, evidently," he added, as something scuttled in a far corner.

"*Ugh!*" Herbert shuddered. "I'll bet there are bats, too."

Local glass-smashers had taken the measure of the windows, which now admitted a weak afternoon sun and a dank breeze that stirred the dust and cobwebs within. Picking their way through shards of glass and bits of debris that had eluded the exodus of Pinchley & Co., the partners made their way through the first large open room into another, where three tiers of floors opened out of a big central well.

"How does one get up there?" Elton wondered.

"There must be a freight elevator somewhere," said Herbert.

"The stairs are over there," said Arthur, pointing.

The door he indicated admitted them, though reluctantly and with much creaking, to a flight of concrete steps. They propped the door open with a piece of scrap wood and, with the aid of Elton's pocket flashlight and a bit of light trickling through the sooty skylight, climbed to the second floor, then to the third. By the time they emerged, Elton and Herbert were perspiring and trembling and paused to catch their breath while Arthur ranged about curiously.

"Why haven't we got rid of this place?" he wanted to know, glancing about with an expression of distaste.

"Do you know anyone who wants it?" panted Herbert.

"No."

"Neither do we."

"Not even the city," added Elton, dabbing at his forehead with his handkerchief. "They keep sending us plaintive reminders about back taxes and threatening to tear the place down, but they never do. They *never* do. Ah, there's the elevator."

An opening large enough to drive a truck through, black with accumulated dirt and grease, yawned before them, barred by a picket of dry, splintered boards, like so many rotting teeth. There was something so forbidding in the aspect as to stifle conversation momentarily, until Herbert cleared his throat and said, "There's the shaft, anyway. Wonder where the elevator is?"

"Down on the first level, I suppose," said Arthur. He stepped to the palings and peered over them into the blackness. A look passed between Herbert and Elton, who started forward as though on the same unspoken cue,

to dart back as Arthur moved to the side and tugged experimentally on the hand-rope. The only result was to precipitate a quantity of dust from farther up the shaft, and Herbert and Elton dosidoed indecisively as Arthur trotted back to the middle of the gate.

"No chance of moving it, I'm afraid," Arthur muttered.

Herbert took a deep breath.

Then something on the floor seemed to catch Arthur's eye. "*Ah!*" he said, brightening. "See a pin and pick it up"—which he did, just as Herbert nerved himself to lunge—"and all the day you'll have good luck!"

Which he did, as Herbert dived over his back, crashed through the elevator gate as though it were made of tongue depressors, and vanished down the shaft without a sound, other than a most conclusive terminal thud.

IT WAS SOME weeks later that Arthur Winters tapped at Elton Thurlow's door and, hearing a quavery response from within, bounded in, his step elastic, his eye bright.

"Good to see you back, Elton!" he exclaimed. "That rest in the sanitarium did you a world of good."

"Thank you." Elton smiled wanly.

"I thought you'd like to know," Arthur continued, the initial amenities exchanged, "that I've paid off Mr. Catanio. He'll trouble us no further. How on earth did you boys manage to get involved with such a character, anyway? Well, well— never mind. I've also talked to the bank, and in view of our sad loss, they've agreed to extend our note for six months. They seem satisfied that ours is basically a sound firm."

"Yes, yes." Elton waved impatiently. It bothered him that he was unable to keep the tremor out of his hand. "I knew you would handle it well, Arthur. Somehow, I haven't been good for much since poor Herbert . . ."

"Poor Herbert!" Arthur echoed, sighing. "It's odd, isn't it? But for the partnership insurance agreement we would have been in a most precarious situation if Herbert hadn't died. In a way, if poor Herbert hadn't been so accident-prone—did you say something, Elton?"

Elton gazed at him, his eyes wild with questions that he knew would never be framed. *Where had you been, the day you took that ferry boat ride, Arthur? To the warehouse, on a scouting expedition? How did you know where the stairs were? Did you suspect something, Arthur?*

And, perhaps most nagging of all—*Was there really a pin on the floor of that filthy warehouse—and how come I never saw it, Arthur?*

"No, Arthur," he managed, at last. "I have nothing to say. Nothing at all. *No.*"

The Bus That Disappeared

by JAMES McKIMMEY

At the Outset, Driver Ralph Tembley Thought It Could Have Been an Accident When His Bus Went off the Road. But There Was Nothing Accidental About it.

THAT AUTUMN morning, the large passenger bus, with its purple paint freshly applied, left the *Sunset Mobile Home Park*, on the San Francisco Peninsula. It contained its first eight passengers, with the others to be picked up along the way to Cheyenne. The old but entirely roadworthy vehicle had already been driven across the Sacramento Valley by its owner, a proud and exuberant 61-year-old Ralph Tembley.

Now it was moving up Highway 50, heading east through the Sierra Nevada Mountains, at a road altitude of perhaps 6,000 feet, when Ralph suddenly saw a red sports car coming toward him at high speed from around a blind curve, in the wrong lane.

Before that shocking moment arrived, Ralph had never felt so good as he had since leaving the Park, driving this vehicle of his with the name he had so fondly given it, the *Purple Pleasure Streak*.

He had started out with Greyhound nearly forty years ago, and returned to bus-driving on and off for nearly all of the succeeding years, when things had gone bust on him with his various business endeavors. Ralph had always wanted, more than anything else in this life, to become a giant business magnate. Finally, having run out of driving jobs to return to, he had been reduced to becoming a custodian at the Park.

Still, Ralph Tembley had not given up on his dream. He had finally saved enough, and made enough personal loans, to make a healthy down payment on the bus now known as the *Purple Pleasure Streak*.

And so today, with eight people already aboard as the result of

his association with them in the Park—the Pearsons, the Lavartians, the honeymooning Bronsons, as well as Oscar Simpson and Sybil Wardlaw—with the knowledge that he would, en route, pick up other people he had got to know in the past driving other busses, Ralph felt that he was on his way to Cheyenne and ultimate fortune . . . until the little red car came flying around a curve ahead, its velocity carrying it into the same lane Ralph was using.

Suddenly, Ralph found himself in a situation that allowed no time whatever for thinking out any sensible recourse—had one existed. He did see the license number of that red car and recorded it mentally.

Side-vision told him there was some sort of small trail running off the highway to the right, between his bus and the oncoming red car.

So Ralph wrenched the steering wheel of his bus, sending the vehicle, with huge tires screaming, toward the mouth of that downward trail, beginning one of the wildest, most electrifying rides Ralph, or anyone else in the bus, had ever taken.

Just when, in that desperate descent, Ralph felt the steering mechanism give out on him, so that the wheel was useless in his hands, he did not know. Nor did he know at what precise point his mind, told him someone had definitely been at work sabotaging the steering mechanism.

Hal Pearson, a tall man of 67 who looked years younger, a sedentary sort of person by nature, but one who had somehow kept a trim figure and a face that seemed to grow more handsome with time, was seated about halfway back in the bus, with his attractive wife Elizabeth. He had retired two years ago as a vice president of the Mammoth Rockpeak Insurance Company of America. He found nothing rewarding about the situation whatsoever—which certainly included this ridiculous trip Liz had talked him into.

He had wanted merely to move someplace, and relax, in comfort, in expensive comfort, if you will.

He could have done all of that, he and Liz—God knew he had made the money, and they had saved and invested it well. But, no, Liz—only a year younger than he—was unable to forget their early struggling years.

So the bloody trailer was trucked in and set up on permanent concrete blocks in that dreadful place, called the *Sunset Mobile Home Park*, which had become their ho-ho retirement Valhalla. Not somewhere along the Southern California coast, such as Laguna Beach, not a small island of Hawaii, not a pleasant chateau in Cannes.

Oh, no. One was to retire in that *trailer,* with not only the

steaks and lobster tails mostly fancies of the imagination, with the martinis rationed out like water in the Sahara.

But right now, Hal knew, as he felt the bus wrenching beneath him, in its wildly unexpected turn, that suddenly everything—even the life of retirement as he had come to know it—might very well be in eminent jeopardy.

He moved his right hand sideways, in Liz's direction, and gripped her left hand tightly, knowing she has leaning forward as he was, hanging onto the seat ahead of them with her free hand. When they flew in jets, he had always had the notion that, if things were going to end then, once the knowledge was confirmed, he would slip his hand around Liz's, and say quietly, "Well, Liz, we've had a good life together."

But this, what they were doing right now was positively ludicrous. Crashing down the side of a damned mountain, hurtling through low-hanging tree branches, sweeping the leaves aside, with Ralph up there hunched over that steering wheel, the muscles of his thick neck looking as though they had turned to stone.

With the Lavartians seated behind them, making not a sound, as usual, with the young Bronsons, to their left, wrapping themselves around each other as though ready to delve into one more conjugal exercise before leaving this life.

With Oscar Simpson, the old buzzard up front behind Ralph, grasping to the back of the driver's seat with clawlike tenacity and beginning to howl like a just-stuck pig, and with Sybil Wardlaw just behind Oscar Simpson, tucking her short-clipped gray head down, assuming the foetal position as though she had been instructed in and ready for this moment all of her 74 years.

Hal had not seen the approach of the small red sports car, full-tilting at the bus. Insead, he had been looking out over the vast expanse of the valley on their right. Why Ralph Tembley had suddenly decided to descend into that valley, in this fashion, was simply beyond Hal Pearson's comprehension.

II

WHEN THE bus finally halted far, far below, it came to a stop in a small clearing, well out of sight of everything but the boulders that semi-surrounded it and the pine-needled carpet of the clearing and the tall trees and a trickle of a stream.

Ralph Tembley, unlocking his hands from the steering wheel, took a long, shuddering breath and said to the rest of the bus, "By God, We *made* it!"

Hal Pearson slowly let go of Liz's hand, examining her to make certain she had not been injured

during their fearful descent, decided that she hadn't and said in his dry, laconic fashion, "What is it that you think we've made, Ralph?"

"*Hal!*" Liz whispered instinctively, always concerned about appearances. Nevertheless, Hal could not help himself when he added, in that same incisive tone:

"Or was this part of the tour, Ralph?"

Then Sybil Wardlaw—silver-topped but tremendously agile—uncoiled her lean and short body from its prepared position for a possible crash, and jumped up to say to Hal, loudly in her clipped-word fashion, "Knock it off, Pearson!"

She moved forward, striding with masculine vigor, extending a hand until she grasped one of Ralph Tembley's.

"Hell of a good show, Ralph! Hadn't done what you did, that fink in the red car would've creamed all of us!"

"That was some miracle, is what it was!" Ralph said, extricating his hand. "The steering mechanism went out on the way down, and I didn't have a darned thing to do with this bus still being upright. She ought to of turned over a half-dozen times! Who did that, anyway?"

"Did what?" Sybil asked.

"Fiddled with the steering mechanism before we left the Park!"

"That's nonsense, Ralph," Sybil replied. "Who'd want to do that? It was just coming down the mountain that way."

"No, ma'am," Ralph said stubbornly and opened the door with a hiss. He grabbed a flashlight from under his seat and started out. "I'm taking a look underneath. And I know what I'm going to find!" He jumped to the ground outside and disappeared under the bus.

Sybil bent down to peer out the windows at the clearing that surrounded them. "Where do you think we are, anyway?" she asked in general.

"Nowhere!" Hal Pearson said. He jabbed angrily at the control on his chair arm that allowed the back to lower, recognizing immediately that they were hopelessly stuck at the bottom of the valley. "Nowhere at all!" he added in his best sardonic fashion, leaning back and lighting a cigarette.

"Oh, Hal?!" Liz Pearson said, then got up to crawl over her husband's long legs. "It isn't anybody's fault, you know. Nobody planned—"

"Yes, it *was* somebody's fault!" Ralph Tembley said, reentering the bus. "The stupid driver of that red sports car for one. But somebody else planned for the steering to go out, all right! Bumping down the mountain did it, all right. But it would've happened anyway, somewhere

along the line to Cheyenne. We could've been going seventy miles an hour down the highway, in Nevada, or Utah, or Wyoming. And that steering mechanism would've gone out."

"Speed limit's fifty-five miles an hour!" Sybil Wardlaw said.

"Who cares when you're traveling across states like Nevada or Utah or Wyoming. Point is—somebody went and did that on purpose. *Why?*"

"You're in a state of shock, Ralph." Sybil spoke knowingly. "It's understandable, but it's not true. Just sit down, Ralph, and gather yourself together. You'll be all right."

"Tried to kill us," Ralph said, sitting down, wagging his head in disbelief. "Somebody went and tried to kill us!"

"Pay no attention to him," Sybil said to the bus at large.

"Good Lord!" Hal Pearson said, tipped back, smoking his cigarette. "The man just crawled under this thing and looked. If he says somebody monkeyed with the steering mechanism—"

"I said it's ridiculous, Pearson, and that's *that!*" Sybil Wardlaw retorted.

Hal Pearson looked upward in disgust and puffed on the cigarette.

Liz, his wife, tried to overlook the fact that he insisted on smoking the beastly thing, no matter his emphysema. Instead, she tried to calm herself by swiftly, expertly, opening the heart-shaped locket she was wearing on a thin golden necklace. It was hollow and contained the nytroglycerine tablets she took for a heart problem.

She popped a tiny tablet into her mouth and then she was in the aisle, already assured by Sybil Wardlaw that Ralph's statement about somebody deliberately disabling the steering mechanism was a figment of his imagination.

"*Sabotage!*" Ralph said from the driver's seat."

"Forget that hooey, Ralph!" Sybil said. "We've got one thing to think about right now, one only. We're here, wherever that is, and we may as well face that fact. And the first thing we're going to do, right now, is take inventory on the condition of everyone here!"

"You're so right!" Liz said, nodding. She was still a magnificently handsome woman, with the sort of inherently graceful style that someone like Sybil Wardlaw would never own. But she was a follower and always had been. Right now, with her husband foolishly piqued into silence by the situation, she instantly swung into the realm of Sybil Wardlaw's personally-assumed command.

"How *is* everyone?" Liz asked all of them, using her best tea-service manner.

"He's hurt," said the pretty, fragile-looking, dark-haired young Bronson girl who had been sitting

across from the Pearsons with her equally young husband. This trip was a gift from the boy's grandparents, who lived in the *Sunset Mobile Home Party*—Liz had heard that one day in the laundry room.

All *right!*" Sybil Wardlaw said, steaming down the aisle. "We've got one hurt there!" A stubby finger jabbed in the direction of the young Jon Bronson, who sat in his seat in a peculiar position, his face mirroring severe pain. "How about in back there!"

Liz looked toward the rear, where the Lavartians sat as though glued together. They were pudgy people, with flat faces except for their prominent noses. They had brought in a mobile home well down the line from where Liz and Hal lived three or four months ago, and Liz had often spoke to them. But the Lavartians had merely stared back in silence.

"*You!*" Sybil called out. "You Lavartians back there. What's your situation? Speak up!"

But the Lavartians did not speak up, merely sat there, pudgy, flat-faced and staring.

Sybil turned toward the front again, calling, "Get your first-aid kit, Ralph, and hurry it!"

"I'm *getting* it!"

"Can you get those people to speak up, Ralph?" Sybil demanded as Ralph finally moved back with his first-aid kit in hand. "The Lavartians back there?"

"I never got a word out of them since they moved into the park," Ralph said.

"How'd they arrange to get on this bus in the first place?"

"He," Ralph said, nodding in the direction of Mr. Lavartian, "gave me the money for the trip. They got on. That's it."

Sybil pointed a finger at the couple in the rear. "You got anything out of commission, speak up now, or that's it." She paused. "No? All right then. What's the matter with *you,* Bronson?" She directed her question at the young man with the pain showing in his eyes. Jon Bronson was handsome, leanly muscular, with longish hair and a good square jaw.

"My leg," Bronson said, nearly whimpering.

"It's his leg," the young girl beside him said.

"What's the matter with it?" Sybil asked.

"I think it's broken."

"*Broken!*" Sybil exploded. "You two people are the only passengers on this excuse for a bus who're under a hundred years old. And one of you managed to break a leg coming down that trail!"

"Now, Sybil," Liz Pearson said, just as she might have said it to Hal. She had got to know the woman on a first-name basis in that same laundry room. Although she remained somewhat in awe of Sybil's presence, she at least

knew something about her—it had taken little urging to get Sybil Wardlaw to talk about her past.

Sybil had joined the WAC during World War II and risen to be a captain. Along the way, she had earned a teaching degree on the GI Bill. After that she had done any number of adventurous things, taking her teaching abilities all over the world. She had ridden the rapids of the Colorado River, skied at Aspen, flown tiny planes over half a hundred various places.

She hadn't retired until she spent a tour with the Peace Corps in another distant country.

But Sybil still had not really retired. Day after day, she would take off in her four-wheel-drive vehicle, wearing safari-styled clothing, a canteen, carrying a camera, and go searching for some rare nearly extinct bird, bug or insect.

"How the hell did you break your leg?" Sybil now demanded of Jon Bronson.

"I got into the wrong position coming down," the young man managed.

"Yeah," Hal Pearson said, lying back, looking up, chuckling, blowing smoke at the ceiling. "He certainly did."

"Foetal position!" Sybil said angrily. "The only one to assume when you've got a potential crash!"

Then she bent to put her hands on the leg of the young man.

"My *God!*" Bronson said, nearly screaming.

But she continued to explore the young man's leg with her hands, ignoring his anguished moans. "Not a compound, anyway. Ralph?" she said, grabbing the first-aid kit the driver was extending. "Get out there and find a piece of wood we can use for a splint. I think he broke his fibula."

"Call it what you may," Hal Pearson stated pleasantly.

"My bus," Ralph said miserably. "My beautiful bus! Who did this to us? Once the steering went out, I felt the shocks go, too. I'll give you even odds the axle's broken! This bus is a wreck!"

"Well," Hal Pearson said calmly, "supposing this bus weren't a wrck, suppose it happened to be still intact, what were you planning to do with it, Ralph? Drive it back up the trail we just fell down?"

"That's not funny, Mr. Pearson!" Ralph spoke indignantly.

"It certainly isn't!" Hal Pearson's wife, Liz, said in staunch agreement.

"Even your own wife knows you ought to stop flapping your mouth, Pearson!" Sybil said. "No, it *isn't* funny! Nothing *about* this is funny. Hurry up, Ralph. Get that stick, like I told you!"

"Yes, *ma'am,*" Ralph said miserably. He returned to the front of the bus, opened the door and disappeared outside.

"Oscar!" Liz Pearson said suddenly and surprisingly.

"What?" said Sybil.

"Old Oscar Simpson! Where *is* he?"

The last Liz had been aware of the old man as when they were plunging down the mountainside, with Oscar bellowing his ancient lungs out. Now, there was not a sign of him.

Slowly, like an apparition, Oscar Simpson's wrinkled face rose from behind one of the seats located behind the driver's position. His ears stuck out as always, and his mouth was puckered into the usual manner that made it seem as though he had just eaten a lime. The old man's faded gray eyes blinked. His voice came forth again, this time foggy and dim, as though he'd overtaxed it entirely.

"Where the danged hell are we?" he asked.

"We don't have an idea," Sybil said impatiently. "What've you been doing anyway, Oscar?"

"Don't know," Oscar said. His gnarled hands gripped the seat back. "We started coming down this here mountain like the banshees was after us. And I knew I was hollering away there. Then things just plain went out on me."

"Fainted, eh?" Sybil said.

"Put her that way if you feel like it." Oscar spoke peevishly.

"Hurt anything?" Sybil demanded.

"Nothing that ain't been hurt before," Oscar said. He sniffed and worked his puckered mouth.

"Think you'll live then?" Sybil asked without any apparent real interest.

Oscar lifted a wrist with great effort and looked at his watch. "For how long?"

"So we've got another clown in this bus, haven't we?" Sybil asked, her temper rising. "Pearson there." She jabbed a finger in the direction of the reclining Hal Pearson. "And Simpson up there. The old mummy!"

Liz put her mouth close to Sybil's ear. "Don't call him a mummy, Sybil!"

"Well, he *is!*"

Then Ralph was climbing back into the bus, with a pine branch that had been smoothed by time and the elements. "Every tire on this here bus is flat."

"Quit complaining, Ralph," Sybil said without sympathy. "Let's just get this kid's leg fixed up. Then we can start worrying about other things. There's water in that stream out there—we got lucky on that one. But we'd better take inventory on what food all of us have, here. We'll get that done when we get this leg taken care of."

"I suggest," Hal Pearson said, from his near-supine position, "and in the best American tradiition, that we set up an organizational personnel structure. As

a first step, I nominate Sybil Wardlaw as king!"

"I second it!" Liz Pearson said with enthusiasm.

"Queen!" Sybil corrected without humor.

"Queen then," said Hal Pearson. "All in favor?"

There was a muttering of ayes.

"Business completed," Hal Pearson said, pushing himself out of his chair, "I'm going to the john."

He started toward the small rest room at the back of the bus.

"You're not going back *there!*" Sybil roared. "How long do you think that thing'll hold without dumping and repriming! That's restricted to the ladies and Bronson there, if he can make it. You want to go to the john, Pearson, head for the outdoors!"

"Good Lord!" Hal Pearson said, doing an about-face.

III

THE JOHN BUSINESS completed, Hal Pearson stood in the clearing where the bus had finally come to rest. Up to this point, he had remained in the detached condition he was able to assume whenever the pressure was on, relaxing his mind and body, letting things simmer in his brain somewhere.

But now he was facing reality. And he did not like it.

The bus *was* a wreck, there was no question of that. It had come down, all right, but it was not going back up. And Hal was not at all certain what *was* going back up, because they had fallen literally into the depths of an absolutely primeval forest, so far from civilization that Hal himself was beginning to feel a delayed, but definite, shock.

He started to reach for a fresh cigarette, but felt a cough coming on—so he resisted both. Instead, he gazed at what existed around the bus.

The winter before had been a dry one, with little snow up here. The summer had been virtually a drought. He imagined that the tiny, trickling stream moving past the clearing would ordinarily be a decent-sized river fed by some glacial lake. The pine needles crackled under the pressure of his soles. The leaves, which had fallen from the branches of the deciduous trees, had become parchment dry.

He could not see more than fifty feet into the woods because the trees were grown so closely together—except where giant gray boulders rested to complete a sort of bulwark on two sides of the clearing.

They had come down some sort of trail, all right. And Ralph Tembley, if the steering mechanism had gone awry as he had described it during the descent, had been right in calling it a miracle that they had landed down here upright.

Now, even the trail was invisible to Hal's eyes. The branches had swung back into place, the bushes had righted themselves after the invasion of heavy airless tires rolling over them. All evidence of their exit from the highway must be gone now as well.

Who, Hal pondered, was the intended victim of the sabotage Ralph had described? The perpetrator of such a thing would have to have had extraordinarily strong motivation for wanting to see his intended victim destroyed.

Hal decided the only thing that mattered to them right now was that there was nothing of escape-hope on the ground around him.

And so he looked upward and saw a fly-speck indication of a jet then. Saw it briefly. And knew that no one in that craft could possibly look down and pick him out, or the bus, or anything in this clearing.

No, he decided, heeling about and starting back toward the bus, they were prisoners and Mother Nature, in her sometimes careless way—apparently helped along by some unknown saboteur —had thrown away the keys.

He paused then, the coughing catching up with him, so that he went into a paroxysm. He had never wanted to be ill. He had never wanted to grow old, either. But he sure as hell was 67. And the emphysema had caught up with him.

If anybody were going to get up and out of this damned prison to get help, it wasn't going to be Hal Pearson. How in God's name could you climb out of a place like this when there were times when you had a hell of a time just crawling out of bed?

When Pearson stepped back into the bus, Sybil had finished attaching a splint to young Jon Bronson's lower leg. She stepped back, admiring her work, as Olivia, Jon's delicate-looking wife, made soft sounds of love and encouragement for her injured mate.

"That done," Sybil said, "Let's move on to the next step!"

Hal returned to his seat wearily, noticing that Liz was hanging on Sybil's every word and motion. "What *is* the next step?" he asked. He had resisted lighting a new cigarette long enough now. So he did that and gazed at Sybil Wardlaw. She had been elected queen, and one had to do the queen's bidding, didn't one?

"Like trying to get somebody on this bus to tell us why somebody'd want to diddle around with the steering mechanism and get us all killed? *Some*body on this bus knows why."

"I *said* that's ri*dic*ulous," Sybil replied.

"It is not!" Ralph, the driver, stated indignantly. "Somebody fiddled with it. And I'm going to try to fix it. *Right now!*"

"That's ridiculous, too!" Sybil said. "*Why,* in heaven's name?"

"It's my bus," Ralph said, somewhat irrationally, then opened the door and got out. Hal could hear him opening the luggage compartment, then saw him taking out a large tool box. Ralph disappeared underneath the bus, and they could hear him beginning to bang away down there.

"Back to the next step," Hal said.

"Yes," Sybil said. "And that's hiking out of here."

"How do I do that with a broken leg?" Jon Bronson complained.

"You don't," Sybil said. "But every other mother's son and daughter who can move out of here is going to!"

"*I'll* do her!" 91-year-old Oscar Simpson shouted from the front of the bus. "By golly, I'll run up that there mountain to the highway and get some help sent down here!"

"You'll stay in the bus!" Sybil retorted sharply.

"*Why?*" Oscar said indignantly.

"You're too damned old to make that climb."

"That's a hell of a thing to say!"

"Well, it's true!"

"You ain't any spring chicken yourself!" Oscar shouted.

"I'm 74," Sybil said. "And that makes me 17 years younger than you are. You're staying in the bus, Simpson."

"Crabby, danged old thing!" Oscar Simpson disappeared from view behind his seat back.

"All right then," Sybil sounded entirely undisturbed by Oscar Simpson's verbal jousting. "Bronson's out of it. Old man Simpson's out. Elizabeth—are you ready to get going?"

"Well . . . " Liz Pearson said, her face flushing.

"She's got a heart condition." Hal Pearson spoke bluntly.

"It's angina," Liz sounded apologetic. She held her golden necklace between two fingers, demonstrating the heart-shaped locket. "I have to take these pills, and . . ."

"All I need to know." Sybil spoke positively. "You'll stay here, too. But you can start getting off it, Pearson! Come *on!* Let's get *going!*"

Hal looked at her and smoked his cigarette, as Liz said. "He can't go either."

"Why not!"

"Emphysema," said Liz.

"He looks healthier than a young colt!"

"I'm sure as hell not a young colt," Hal said. "And I've got emphysema."

"*Bull!* When'd you instruct your wife to dish out that one?"

"He *didn't,*" Liz said plaintively. "Truly. He—"

"It's a cop-out, Pearson!" Sybil said.

"All right," Hal said. "It's a cop-out then. Whatever you say, your highness."

But then Sybil suddenly lost

interest in Hal Pearson and turned to the back of the bus, shouting, "What's going on back there!"

Hal turned, so that he could look back at the Lavartians in the rear. Both held huge sandwiches, taken from a large wicker basket. They had stopped chewing, at the sound of Sybil's question, but their mouths were full of food.

Sybil marched in their direction, saying, "What's the matter with you, anyway! We're pooling every bit of food anybody's got, and we're going to ration it out."

Both of the Lavartians stared at Sybil, their eyes reflecting absolutely nothing. They simply sat there, pudgy, flat-faced except for their large noses. Then Mr. Lavartian began chewing again. His wife did the same.

"Stop that *eating!*" Sybil said. "And start getting ready to leave this bus to climb back up the mountain. Do you hear me?"

Suddenly Mr. Lavartian stood up, stretching his face toward Sybil. He began shouting back at her. He was not speaking English, Hal knew, but he was speaking very loudly, very furiously. He moved forward, closer to Sybil, who stepped back, paling a little. Hal watched with amusement.

Suddenly, the man stopped shouting and sat down and took another bite from his sandwich, chewing as he stared impassively at a still-retreating Sybil.

"What did he say?" Sybil asked the bus in general.

There was no response.

"I've never heard anything like that before," Sybil said. "I've been around the world three times. And I've never heard a language like that in my life!"

"Etruscan?" Hal Pearson asked dryly.

"Nonsense!" Sybil stated.

"Why don't you *ask* him what language he's speaking?" Hal said gently.

"I wouldn't go back there and touch that situation again with a hundred-foot pole, Pearson. *You* ask him, if you want to.'

"I'll sit right here, thanks."

"It wasn't Low Country," Sybil said thoughtfully. "It certainly wasn't Far East. Possibly *Near* East, but where?"

"Swedish?" Hal said.

"Don't be ridiculous!"

"Yiddish?" Hal suggested.

"You like to play the ass, don't you, Pearson?" Sybil retorted. "And it isn't a hell of a difficult job for you, either, is it?" She shook her head. "Possibly something of a North African nature, but they don't look it! Maybe I'm coming closer with the Tibetan area—"

In the back of the bus Mr. Lavartian rose again and began shouting in his strange language. He looked very angry once more.

"All *right!*" Sybil called back

to him. "We'll drop it!"

Mr. Lavartian sat down, suddenly silent again.

"So they're out, too," Sybil said, demonstrating a shade of defeat. "That just leaves me and this girl here and—what's your first name anyway?" she asked Jon Bronson's bride.

"Olivia," the girl said shyly.

"Okay then. I'm going up the mountain. You're going, Olivia. And Ralph—"

"Olivia's not going," said Jon Bronson quietly and with finality.

"What do you mean she isn't going?" Sybil said.

"She isn't going," Jon Bronson repeated, looking grim.

"How old are you?" Sybil asked Olivia Bronson.

"Nineteen."

"She's *going!* If Ralph and I can do it, she sure as hell can!"

"No," Jon Bronson insisted. "What makes you think you're queen of the May, anyway!"

"I was *voted* that, here!" Sybil retorted.

"Not by me," Jon Bronson said.

"Are you going?" Sybil said, addressing herself directly to the young bride. "Or are you letting him think for you!"

The pretty girl blinked. "He's my husband."

"All *right.* But are you letting him do all the thinking for you?"

"Don't listen to her," Jon Bronson said, closing a hand tightly over his young wife's.

"What are you *afraid* of?" Sybil asked the young man. "All we do is climb the mountain, flag a car, and—"

"That's a jungle out there," Jon Bronson stated.

"How do you know?" Sybil asked. "You don't look like you've ever been in the wilderness! You're not the type and I know it. *Have* you been? In the wilderness before?"

"I've seen movies on TV," Bronson said distantly.

Sybil actually snorted.

"There's wild animals out there," Bronson said.

"Wild animals don't bother you unless you bother them?" Sybil said.

"Bears do," Bronson said.

"I'm not worried about bears," Sybil said. "Are you worried about bears, Olivia?

"I don't know," Olivia said. "I never thought about bears before. It's just that if Jon wants me to stay with him—"

Ralph Tembley got back into the bus, with his toolbox. "That's a mess down there. Take me forever to fix that up, with these here tools I got. What I ought to have is—"

"Will you tune out on that, Ralph?" Sybil said. "We're in trouble. If we don't get help, we could starve to death! Did you bring along any kind of firearms, Ralph, so we could hunt for meat?"

"No." Ralph spoke glumly, sitting again in the driver's seat.

"You see what I mean?" Sybil continued. "Now those Lavartians, back there, probably have enough food to last for weeks. But they're putting it away like there's no tomorrow."

Mr. Lavartian had risen again. Sybil put up a flat hand, saying quickly, "Forget I said that!"

Mr. Lavartian sat down.

Sybil took a breath. "We *need* you, Olivia. *Please.* I'm begging, for heaven's sake. You're young. You're strong. *Please,* Olivia—"

"Snakes," Jon Bronson said. "She could step on a whole nest of rattlesnakes! I tell you she's not going, Wardlaw. And that's it!"

Sybil Wardlaw closed her mouth, her lips compressed tightly together, staring at the young man with comtempt, if not pure hatred.

"I would," Olivia said timorously, "if Jon said I could."

"For*get* it," Sybil said with disgust. "It's just me and Ralph then. Do you understand, Ralph? You and I—we're climbing out of here to get help."

"My poor bus," Ralph said, his voice breaking. "I put everything on her, this bus—*everything.*"

"Quit sniveling," Sybil said, returning to her seat and getting a purse large as a small suitcase. "I'm collecting all the food we've got. But not *yours*, Lavartian!" she called out quickly, before the man could rise again. "Then I'll redistribute. After that, Ralph and I'll go up the mountain."

"Maybe somebody's already coming down to help us," Olivia Bronson offered.

"That's really living in a dream world!" Sybil said. "*Who,* I wonder?"

"We skidded just before we started down," Olivia said. "The tires must have left marks on the highway."

"How many skid marks altogether did you see on that highway, Ralph?" Sybil demanded. "Driving from the Bay Area?"

"A thousand," Ralph said. "Maybe two thousand."

"That shoots *that* in the behind, doesn't it, little girl?" Sybil said to Olivia.

"But," Olivia persisted, "Mr. Tembley was going to pick up other people, along the way to Cheyenne. Weren't you, Mr. Tembley?"

"*Yes!*" Ralph said, brightening a fraction.

"Well, when you don't pick them up," Olivia argued, "they're going to report it, aren't they? You can't have a whole bus like this just disappear."

"I want an honest answer from you, Ralph," Sybil said to the owner of the hapless bus. "You say you were going to pick up a bunch of other passengers on the way to Cheyenne."

"That's *right!*" Ralph said, developing enthusiasm. "I wrote to them, told them I had the

bus, said I was traveling to Cheyenne from the Bay Area and back again. They were regular passengers I had in the old days working for Greyhound, then for charter companies. I got what-you-call confirmations from every *one* of them. They're *waiting* for us to come along and pick them up, in Tahoe, Reno, Winnemuca, Elko, Salt Lake City!"

"Yeah, all right," Sybil said. "I still want an honest answer from you, Ralph. How many of those people're just going to say Ralph failed again? Huh?"

Hal Pearson felt Liz's mouth next to his ear, as she whispered, "I don't think she should talk so harshly to Ralph, Hal. Honestly."

"Isn't it enough my bus is all broken up like this, without you having to go and talk to me that way?" Ralph said, miserable again.

"Maybe," Hal Pearson said quietly, "whoever wanted somebody on this bus wiped out has got it figured exactly where we are, right now. Maybe they were trailing the bus when it went over. Maybe they're working their way down here right now to finish the job. Maybe we don't have anything to worry about because we won't live long enough to care!"

"You're full of fiction, Pearson," Sybil said.

"Maybe he isn't," Ralph said. "If you'd get under the bus with me, I could—"

"I'm not getting under the bus with you, Ralph," Sybil said. "We're climbing up the mountain. Because sure as hell nobody's coming down looking for us."

IV

THE AFTERNOON began chilling as the sun went past the trees and left the purple bus in shadow. The food had been redistributed. Now Hal and Liz Pearson owned an apple, an orange, two sticks of peppermint gum, one seventh of a ham sandwich and one small bar of energy food, the last, compliments of Sybil Wardlaw, who was now on her way upward toward the highway with Ralph Tembley.

All of it was 100% more sustenance than the Pearsons had originally owned, in this bus. Still, Hal would have to become a hell of a lot hungrier than he was to start in on this supply of stuff Sybil had passed out.

"I'm a civilized man, Liz," Hal said quietly to his wife. "I've never cared for getting into the wilderness in any fashion. I've never cared at all for outdoor adventures."

"Ummm," Liz said in agreement.

"How long have they been gone now?"

"Sybil and Ralph?"

"Who else is gone?"

"Don't take it out on me, Hal." She looked at her watch. "About an hour."

"Seems like twenty." Hal rubbed his nose angrily and stared forward in the bus. Ralph had instructed him on how to close the door after he and Sybil left. So the door was now closed. They didn't want anything from out there boarding the bus, including mice, squirrels, birds or chipmunks. Young Jon Bronson had suggested that if a chipmunk ever got inside the *Purple Pleasure Streak,* the animal might very well be carryng the bubonic plague.

"Do you really think somebody wanted one of us killed, Hal?" Liz asked.

"I don't think they wanted you killed. Or me."

"Well, I mean somebody else, on this bus?"

"Ralph said the steering mechanism had been fixed, didn't he?"

"But Sybil wouldn't buy it, would she?"

"Maybe she's the one they were after. Which is why she said she wouldn't buy it. And still won't. I think she protesteth too much."

"But *why?* Why would anybody want Sybil killed?"

"How many answers do you want?"

"You're being sarcastic, Hal. I'm trying to be serious. Like—"

"Like what?"

"Well, what I'm trying to say is that it would take a monster to be willing to kill all the rest of us, just to kill Sybil. Wouldn't it?"

"Maybe it'd just take the inclination."

"*Hal!* I mean it—a *monster,* to do something like that!"

"If the person wasn't a monster in the first place, I think Sybil Wardlaw might just be the one to turn him into one."

"You're not even trying to be serious. And I *am!* So, if they weren't after Sybil, who else then?"

"How about Bronson, across the aisle?"

"Don't let him hear you!"

"He won't. He's busy with his bride."

"Why him, Hal?"

"What do we know about him, anyway? Those two are the only ones who don't really belong on a bus trip like this, aren't they? How do I know what he might have been into? For all we know, he could be the biggest dope pusher on the West Coast."

"The trip was a wedding gift from his grandparents."

"That's what you *heard.*"

"Well then, who else? It couldn't be old Oscar Simpson."

"I'll buy that."

"It certainly couldn't be Ralph."

"Mmmm," Hal said noncommittally. "I talked him into buying a good bit of extra insurance, before we left, you know—a lot more than he was required to have."

"I didn't know that."

"Maybe something came to

him, after that red car forced us off the road, after we started rolling down here. Maybe the steering mechanism didn't go out at all, like he said. Maybe he just said that to make sure the insurance company couldn't accuse him of careless driving, sending us down the mountain this way."

"Well, but wouldn't they examine the bus for that? Later? If we ever got out of here?"

"He was down there with this tool box, wasn't he?—maybe making it look as if somebody'd tampered with the mechanism?"

"How about the Lavartians?" Liz whispered. "We just don't know a thing about them either, do we?"

"One thing. They're eating again."

"I know. They smack their lips. I can hear it."

"Well, it doesn't make me hungry, I can assure you of that." Hal spoke honestly. "I just wish to God I had a drink. A very dry, frosty martini, for instance."

"Sometimes I think you're turning into an alcoholic since you retired, dear."

"When you've retired, who cares what you're turning into?"

"Well, we don't have any martinis."

"No, we don't have a damned thing!"

"Don't get into a snit over not having a drink, Hal." Liz spoke patiently. "It saves a little money not to have one. And, too, just remember that it's bad enough as it is."

It might get a hell of a lot worse, Hal thought.

"Was that thunder I just heard? Liz asked.

"I don't know," Hal said.

"Didn't you hear it, way off?"

"I heard it. It hasn't rained for weeks. Now, I suppose, it's going to rain the skies dry!"

"It won't make it easier for Sybil and Ralph if it does." Liz sounded worried. "Do you think they'll make it, all right, dear?'

"I don't want to think about it," Hal said. He pressed the device on the arm of his seat and tilted back a little. "I need a drink," he said.

"I'm worried about you, Hal," Liz aid. "Truly."

"Just one decent drink," Hal said. "I want one so badly I can even smell it—booze, I mean."

"Now you've got me doing it—smelling it, I mean."

"One drink," Hal said to the ceiling. "Any variety."

"I'm going to get up and stretch," Liz said.

Seconds later, he heard her calling from up front, "Hal—come up here. *Quickly!* It's Oscar!"

Hal stood up. The Lavartians were busy eating. The Bronsons remained entwined together. He went up the aisle swiftly.

"Look," Liz said, pointing at the pair of seats across which old Oscar Simpson lay motionless. "He's fanted again. Only this

time I think he's dead!"

Hal's nostrils twitched. He bent down. He reached under the seats on which the old man was lying and picked up a pint whiskey bottle. The bottle was empty.

"*Is* he?" Liz asked. "Dead?"

"Don't you see what I've got in my hand?" Hal said.

"Oh!" Liz said, looking at the bottle.

"He drank this whole damned thing, all by himself. Now he's passed out."

"My goodness!"

Hal dropped the bottle beside the unmoving figure of Oscar Simpson and marched back to his seat. Liz turned and climbed over his legs to sit down.

"I didn't even know he drank," Liz said.

"That burns me up," Hal said.

"He'll have a terrible hangover when he wakes up."

"I hope to God he does! He could have shared that, you know!"

"Now, Hal."

"Selfish old fool! All I wanted was one drink!"

"You're talking so loudly!"

"Then I won't talk anymore!"

Hal closed his eyes, but he could feel the fury pulsing in his temples.

It was just after all light had gone from the clearing when Hal, finally able to doze off for a few seconds, was awakened by a hard pounding on the bus door.

"Bandits." He heard young Jon Bronson whisper.

Hal got up and went along the aisle to open the door with a hiss. "Who is it?" he asked of the darkness.

"Get some lights on in there," came a familiar voice, "and hurry up about it!"

Hal fumbled about the controls until he found the switch that turned on the overhead lights, then looked out to see who was coming through the door.

It was Sybil and Ralph. And they were not the same people who had left to climb the mountain hours before.

Sybil, being helped up by Ralph, had her left arm in a sling improvised from clothing obviously torn from her own attire. The arm had been splinted in the same fashion as Jon Bronson's leg. She was bruised on the face, and already demonstrated a notable black eye. She was also very dirty. Behind her struggled Ralph, just as dirty. His face was also bruised, his hair tousled.

"Who is it?" Jon Bronson called from behind.

Hal told him, then reached down to assist Sybil.

"Get your hands off me, Pearson," she responded. "But, for heaven's sake, help Ralph get back in here! He's got a sprained ankle."

"What happened?" Liz called from her position.

"Avalanche!" Sybil said, moving along the aisle.

And that, Hal knew, helping Ralph in, accounted for the sound he had thought to be thunder.

Ralph got himself into the swiveling driver's seat and shook his head mournfully. "Just about got us. We must have loosened them rocks coming down in this here bus. And when Sybil and me was going back up, they came away altogether."

"I'm so sorry! Liz called.

Sybil had reached where old Oscar Simpson lay. "Dead?"

"Drunk," Hal said, following her.

"Smells like it," Sybil said, then dropped into the seat she had previously occupied, putting her head back. "That trail we were following!"

"What about it?" Olivia asked worriedly.

"It's gone," Ralph stated sadly. "Wiped out."

"Take a mountain goat to get up and over that thing," Sybil said.

"We shot our wad for sure now," Ralph said, swiveling his chair, putting his arms on the steering wheel and resting his head on it.

"Quit sniveling, Ralph," Sybil spoke loudly. "Where there's a will, there's a way."

"If you're a mountain goat," Hal Pearson said from his own seat.

"Your wife's sorry about us nearly getting killed," Sybil said. "But obviously you don't give a damn, Pearson."

"I give a damn," Hal said, sighing. "I certainly do."

"Because your own skin's in real danger now, huh?" Sybil scrunched around and put her head out over the aisle and looked back at the Lavartians, illuminated now. Both had thick sandwiches in their hands again. Both stopped eating and stared back at Sybil.

"My God!" she whispered and fell back into position.

Olivia Bronson sat in her seat beside her husband, who was resting back, sound asleep, in the awkward posture he had to assume since breaking the leg.

The bus had been darkened. All Olivia could see now was some of the clearing outside, lighted by a fragment of moon. She could hear the Lavartians snoring. And she could also hear wind and the running of the small stream outside.

It was all very eerie and weird, she thought.

She thought also, for a moment, that she might just cry. She knew at last she had no one really to depend on.

She turned her head, looking at the dim profile of her new husband. Well, she decided, he was, it turned out, someone she had never really known, until now.

Their courtship had been perfectly wonderful. She thought her parents had never liked one of her boyfriends so much as they liked Jon, with his extreme good

looks, charm and beautiful smile.

But after Olivia had announced her intended marriage to Jon, it all went down the drain at home in San Francisco. Her father blew up. And her mother, going in her father's direction, had joined in the sudden castigation of Jon.

But she had defied her parents' wishes—she had married Jon anyway.

After which, Jon had announced a surprise honeymoon. They were going, he said, improbably and somewhat sullenly, to Cheyenne.

He then explained, angrily, that the bus trip was a gift from his maternal grandparents, who, as Olivia knew, lived in a trailer village down the Peninsula.

It was then that Olivia realized he had found it impossible to refuse the gift.

He did not like it. She had come to know him well enough to realize that he was absolutely furious that they had landed on this purple bus with people so *old* that it was absolutely ridiculous.

Nevertheless, he had given in to the idea. So now, because of having to take this trip, because Jon had been unable to do what he so easily expected her to do—defy close family preferences—Jon's leg was broken, and there was seemingly no way out of a situation growing worse by the minute.

So Olivia was beginning to realize just how alone she was, in this world.

Oh, she still loved her brand-new husband, all right. But she was certain, now, that Jon's refusal to allow her to leave the bus was simply because he was afraid of her leaving *him* behind.

V

WHEN THE FIRST light of dawn came down through the trees to the clearing where the bus rested, illuminating the huge boulders that formed part of its boundries, making the running water of the tiny stream glisten, Sybil Wardlaw rose and moved to the aisle to stand there with an arm broken and her face still dirty and bruised, the blacked eye nearly closed now.

"Everybody awake here?"

Everyone shifted in their seats, including Hal Pearson, who pressed the control gadget on his arm rest and moved upright, feeling stiff from the night's effort at sleep. "She's loud," he muttered to Liz. "She's really loud!"

"Everybody listening?" Sybil demanded. "And that includes *you*, Oscar!"

Hal could see the top of old Oscar Simpson's head now and knew the man had finally slept off his little drunk and was at least sitting upright.

"I don't know what's going on," Oscar complained.

"Of course you don't," Sybil

said. "That's why I'm talking to you this way!"

"Well, I ain't deaf! So whyn't you tone it down, lady!"

"Shut *up,* Simpson, and listen to what I'm going to say!"

"Old quacker!" Oscar said petulantly.

"I've slept on this," Sybil went on, "and I've figured out the single solution for this situation. Now. I've previously gone over the possibilities of our simply being found, down here. And what did I come up with?"

"Zero," Hal said wearily.

"Corect—*zilch!* So. Among a great many other activities I've engaged in during my life, I once worked for the U.S. Forest Service, teaching nature to passengers aboard the Alaska State Ferry, which sailed between Prince Rupert, B.C. and Skagway, Alaska—the *M.V. Malspina,* to be exact."

"But what's the solution?" Hal asked.

"After my employment with the Forest Service, I developed an association with other employees of that organization elsewhere, such as with members working right here in these mountains!"

"What do we do?" Hal said. "Pick up the phone and call the Forest Service?"

"Funny, Pearson—really funny. But we *are* going to communicate with them."

"How?" Ralph Tembley asked.

"The greatest worry the Forest Service people have at this time of the year, especially after a severe drought, is one thing," Sybil continued. "Who wants to guess what that might be?"

She was back teaching school, Hal thought miserably.

"Fire?" Olivia Bronson volunteered timidly.

"You've got it right, little sister. *Fire!* They've got lookout posiions all through these mountains! They're looking for smoke. And that's what we're going to give them!"

Hal Pearson put out his cigarette and sat more upright and alert.

"I'm not sure I heard that correctly."

"We," Sybil said dramatically, "are going to go out into this clearing we're in. We are going to gather together a bunch of dead wood. We are going to ask Ralph here to give us an inventory on his fire-control equipment—how about it, Ralph? Buckets?

"Well," Ralph said, scratching his nose, "I got a couple down there in the luggage section."

"Shovels?" Sybil asked. "Axes?"

"Two shovels. Two axes."

"Good enough," Sybil said. "So—we remove that equipment and lay it outside on the ready. And then we set fire to that bunch of dead wood. *There's* your solution folks! Let's have at it!"

Hal found himself blinking

rapidly. "Somebody opened up the booby hatch when you got loose, Wardlaw!" he said angrily. "It's dry as old straw out there. If you start a fire that runs over here to this bus, it'll explode like the first atom bomb going off! I tell you!"

"It's our only chance," Sybil said emphatically. "Those in favor say aye!"

There was a response of several ayes, including one from Liz, Hal realized incredulously.

"Against?"

"Nay!" Hal thundered.

But his nay was the only one, so Sybil said, "The ayes have it! Let's get started!"

Then Sybil was leaving the bus, starting a song that Hal remembered was popular during World War II.

He felt Liz nudging him. "Come on, Hal. *Move* it!"

"I don't be*lieve* this!" Hal managed.

An hour later Hal Pearson stood outside, watching bleakly as the final bough was tossed on a pile of wood that was far, far too large in his estimation. Liz had carried some small twigs to the cremation circle. But Hal had offered no assistance. Young Jon Bronson had remained in the bus, of course—the best he could manage was a laborious trek to the bus' toilet. The Lavartians would not budge from the vehicle either, no matter what angry urging Sybil had given them.

Olivia Bronson, looking out of place and entirely ineffectual outside, had joined them, leaving the bus although her husband had protested.

Oscar Simpson had gone at gathering wood with great energy for several seconds, but then had become unsteady. Sybil had been required to guide him back to the bus.

As a result, it had been mainly Sybil, one-handed with an arm broken, and, Ralph hopping on one foot because of his sprained ankle, who had managed to build the collection of limbs. All of it, Hal thought bitterly, was absolute insanity.

"Buckets here," Sybil said. "Axes there. Shovels there." She nodded with satisfaction. "Get out your matches, Ralph."

"Don't do it, Ralph," Hal Pearson said firmly.

"Hush up, Pearson," Sybil said. "Light her up!"

And so Ralph set fire to a small teepee made of fragile twigs, which would, in turn, start the heavier pieces of wood burning.

Hal watched that fire building, and heard Sybil saying happily, "She's burning straight up—not a breath of breeze! *Perfect!*"

Hal closed his eyes, opened them, then examined the way pine needles lay across the floor of the clearing. They had been scraped away from the immediate circumference of what was now a building, snapping fire. But if

some of those flames jumped too far . . .

"Come on there, lookouts!" Sybil shouted. *"Put your binoculars on it! Send out the helicopters!"*

Hal switched his attention to the small stream just beyond, trickling by without force. Then he felt something against his face: a small breeze.

"Put it *out!*" Hal snapped and moved forward to grab a bucket.

"Let her *burn!*" Sybil called.

"There's a wind coming up!" Hal snapped back at her, dipping the bucket into the stream. He moved back toward the fire, seeing suddenly, and with developing panic, that the wind was blowing the flames dangerously in the direction of the fallen bone-dry pine needles.

"Let's get this thing *out!*" he ordered angrily.

"We just got it started, Hal," Liz said, standing still now, as was Olivia Bronson, both watching the flames with fascination.

"Hurry *up!*" Hal said, heaving the bucket of water over the leaping flames.

"What do you think you're doing, Pearson!" Sybil said.

Then she saw that the flames had now jumped the cleared area around the fire and had ignited some of the pine needles.

"He's *right!*" Ralph shouted suddenly. He picked up a bucket and hopped toward the stream, as Hal Pearson returned for another supply of water.

Sybil looked confused for a moment, then grabbed up a shovel. *"All right there!"* she called in the direction of Liz Pearson and Olivia Bronson. "Let's get this fire out! Why're you just standing there that way? You want to burn down the whole forest!"

Hal tossed a second bucket of water over the area where the pine needles had caught fire, then began returning to the stream, after which everything became a wheezing, tear-blinding; cough-racked blur.

Then, finally, it was out, with shovels having cut small troughs that were enough to cut off the travels of the needle-fueled flames, axes having chopped through the rocky soil to cut similar troughs—Hal had some dim, unreal memory of Olivia Bronson swinging an axe with vengeance, her teeth showing in a white grimace.

And finally he was staggering to a small boulder, where he sat down, trying to control his coughing and breathing. He dimly saw Liz coming to him, eating pills out of her locket.

"Are you all right, Hal?" Liz managed.

"Yeah," he whispered. "You, Liz?"

"I'm all right, too, I think."

Then Hal heard Sybil Wardlaw calling to him in an angry, breath-

less voice, "If you'd got that water going sooner, Pearson, it'd never got so much out of hand! Slow thinking, Pearson!"

Liz Pearson saw her husband's mouth moving, but she could not make out what he was saying. And so, holding her hand tightly over where her heart should be, she bent closer to him. "What did you say, Hal?"

"I'm going to kill her," Hal Pearson wheezed. "Maybe somebody already tried it, when they monkeyed with the steering mechanism. But, by God, *I'm* going to get the job *done!*"

He did not, of course.

Instead, when the death of flames had become a definite fact, they all crawled back into the bus, where everyone collapsed. The Lavartians, Hal noticed without emotion or care, were eating again. Jon Bronson welcomed his bride's return with a grasping, hungry embrace.

"She damned near destroyed all of us," Hal whispered.

Liz, beside him, continuing to defend, said. "She was only suggesting what she thought was best, dear."

Then Sybil Wardlaw suddenly hopped up from her seat to stand spraddle-legged in the aisle. "Now I've got my breath back. And I think it's time to get somebody outside to show them there's life here, when they get that first helicopter over us! They've seen the smoke that fire was making by now. I'll take the first shift. Thank God for the fire, eh, folks?"

Hal started struggling to get out of his seat. Liz grabbed hold of him, tightly.

"Choke her to death!" he grunted. "Choke her . . .!"

But Liz held on stubbornly.

They waited out the afternoon, each one taking a turn outside, watching for a Forest Service helicopter. But the day waned, with Olivia Bronson outside, and no helicopter had appeared.

"Time to relieve the girl, Ralph!" Sybil said.

"What for, Wardlaw?" Hal said. "It's almost dark! It just didn't work, did it?"

"Bring her in then," Sybil ordered, ignoring Hal's last statement.

"Yes!" Jon Bronson said angrily. "Bring her in!"

Ralph Tembley got up wearily, hopped his way down the steps to the outside. Hal could hear him calling.

Finally Ralph reappeared, jumping with one foot up the steps. "She's gone!"

Jon Bronson brought himself up with his two arms, balancing himself in a kind of reverse push-up position. "Gone?"

"*Gone!*" said Ralph. "Now look here. My flashlight's disappeared, too. She must of snitched it and then run off."

Jon Bronson's Adam's apple worked up and down. Then finally

he said, nearly screaming, "*Damn* you! *All* of you!"

Then Hal Pearson was astonished to realize that Mr. Lavartian had jumped up and was hurrying forward in the bus. "I help!" Lavartian said, speaking English for the first time. "I find her!"

The man disappeared out the door. And there was sudden, shocked silence as everyone looked back at Mrs. Lavartian, who said nothing but only blinked rapidly.

Finally Jon Bronson found his voice again, shouting, "Now that's a man for you, after all. Do you hear that? You all thought he was nuts. But who's going after my wife?"

She had been climbing so long, now, that she was certain she could not go another foot. And she realized, finally, how stupidly futile what she was doing had been. She didn't know remotely where she was, nor if she was still going in even a semblance of the right direction, although she had obviously detoured the avalanche area.

So she sat down, clumsily, flashlight in hand, fatigue weighing her into this position on the rocky ground with its sage and manzanita clumps she'd been using to grasp and help pull herself upward.

She kept remembering how those terribly old people had struggled to put that fire out. Sybil Wardlaw—even though she had been responsible for it in the first place—working away like that with one hand. Her broken arm must have been severely painful.

Ralph Tembley, hopping away on one foot, surely in great pain too, but continuing to carry bucket after bucket of water. And Mrs. Pearson, even with a heart condition, still trying to use a shovel. And Mr. Pearson—he was coughing and gasping so hard, and yet he had kept bringing water to kill the fire.

Jon had remained in the bus, of course. But what *else* could he do? Along with those silly Lavartians, who refused to help with *any*thing.

She had known, then, that if anyone were going to get them out of their dreadful situation, it had to be Olivia Bronson.

So, finally—and much too late, she was certain now—she had left them, and begun the climb.

She took a breath and pushed herself up again, starting to climb once more, gritting teeth against the effort.

Then she heard a sudden scrambling noise behind her. She whirled, screaming. Instinctively she pointed the flash in the direction of the sound. And she saw the shape moving toward her.

She opened her mouth again, in total amazement. Then the flashlight was torn from her hand. And she was knocked to the rocky ground.

She landed on hands and knees, shaking her head. She was crying now. She simply couldn't help it. And she still could not believe that the figure she had seen in the beam of the flashlight, the one that had torn the flash from her hand and knocked her down, had been Mr. Lavartian . . .

VI

HAL PEARSON found the San Francisco building that contained the Forest Service regional headquarters and went inside. As he rode the elevator to the floor indicated on the directory in the lobby, he kept thinking, despite all that had happened, things had gone back pretty much to normal, in the *Sunset Mobile Home Park.*

The mystery of the sabotaged bus—and the steering mechanism had indeed been tampered with—had been solved, when Mr. Lavartian, or whatever his real name was, had managed to climb to the highway and get to the nearest sheriff's office.

There—and the rest of the bus' passengers learned all this after they'd been rescued by helicopter—Lavartian had explained that he had been the head of a small country in Europe, or was it Asia? Hal Pearson simply could not remember its name or location, it had been so tiny. Lavartian had further explained that he had been toppled from power and fled.

But his enemies had pursued him, wanting, with fanatic zeal, to see him dead. Lavartian had chosen the *Sunset Mobile Home Park,* for an unlikely place to be found. But he had began deducing, and correctly, that his enemies were closing on him.

That was when he decided to leave by the most logical and unsuspecting manner possible, for a resident of the Park—in Ralph Tembley's *Purple Pleasure Streak.* He and his wife had planned, after reaching Cheyenne, to find another place to hide.

But Lavartian's enemies had been quicker than he expected, and had, consequently, fixed the steering mechanism of Ralph's bus.

Lavartian had then made his deal with the authorities. He would tell them were the *Purple Pleasure Streak* and its occupants were, he would tell them where to look for a lost and helpless Olivia Bronson—but only if he and his wife, once she was rescued with the others, were allowed to disappear quietly.

So life in the Park had resumed in the usual fashion, minus the Lavartians.

Sybil Wardlaw strode by the Pearsons' trailer in her usual military fashion most every evening, her healing arm in a sling, speaking to Liz, if not to Hal.

Hal saw Oscar Simpson now and then, never quite certain if the old man's tottering gait should

be blamed on age or booze.

Insurance money had allowed Ralph Tembley to acquire a new bus and begin anew his quest for becoming a giant corporation magnate. The *Purplle Pleasure Streak* itself would never leave its resting place in that clearing in the valley. But Ralph had gained some additional satisfaction, as the result of remembering the license number of the red sports car that had forced him off the road—the car had been stolen, and Ralph learned that the driver had been arrested and was now residing in jail.

Hal and Liz Pearson had seen the young Bronsons two or three times since the accident, when the young people had visited Jon Bronson's grandparents in the Park. They both—especially the girl—seemed to have matured.

Hal reached his floor in the building in San Francisco. And minutes later he was seated in the office of a uniformed Forest Service employee, a humorless-looking man in his late forties, who gazed at Hal with what could be nothing other than contempt, Hal decided.

Hal handed him a piece of paper, which he had received through the mail, and said, "This summons, this thing, this whatever-it-is, told me to report here, at this time."

The man held the paper, looked at it, dropped it. "That's right."

"What's it all about?" Hal asked.

"After we got you people out of that area where the bus landed, we inspected the clearing very carefully."

"We," Hal said.

"People in the Service," the man said grimly.

"And?"

"We found evidence of that fire."

"Oh, yes," Hal said. "That fire."

"We did not find it amusing, sir."

"No, I don't suppose you did." He did not like the man, and he made no effort to conceal the fact.

"Purposely setting a fire like that, in a place like that, under conditions like that, is a gross and flagrant disregard of common sense, as well as of the law, sir."

"All right," Hal said dryly. "But why are you telling *me?*"

"Because you're the one who was responsible!"

"*I* was?"

"She told us, you know."

"Who did?"

Sybil Wardlaw," the man said, working into true anger now. "Came to us and laid it out just like it was, down there in that clearing."

"Well, just how the hell was it!" Hal demanded.

"She explained that you, as a former highly-paid executive for

a major insurance company, quite naturally assumed leadership, in that group. That, finally, and despite your seeming intelligence, and what is assumed to be an impressive background, you foolishly, idiotically and stupidly ordered that fire to be built and set!"

"She," Hal said, blinking rapidly, "is a rotten liar!"

"Sybil Wardlaw?" the man asked, in near outrage now. "She was one of *us*, years ago!"

"She's a liar just the same!" Hal said, getting up.

"Sir," the other man said, managing just barely to control his voice. "I called you in here simply to deliver a verbal correction to you. And I was going to leave it at that. But I can carry it further! I can have you put before a *magistrate!*"

"Well, then do it!" Hal said loudly, turning, thinking that when he got home, he was simply going to lay it on the line to Liz, about the fact that they were leaving the *Sunset Mobile Home Park* and going somewhere else that was decent, to continue their aging.

"*Write* that citation!" Hal said, moving toward the door. "Then roll it up. And stick it in your ear. And then, if you want to see me again, go ahead and make the effort. Try for me in Tahiti, just for starters! Do you hear that? Tahiti's where you'll find me criminally drunk on martinis! And that's just for starters!"

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Death Blues

by STEPHEN MERTZ

Stomper Crawford, King of the Blues, Dropped out of Sight Eight Years Back — and His Return Prompted Nothing but Trouble.

CARL HENSMAN looked up at me excitedly from the old 78-rpm record spinning on the turntable. He was a thin studious-looking guy with thinning blond hair, in his mid-thirties.

"No one's ever been able to sing like that. It's a voice like no other. And all these years everyone thought he was dead."

"Let it play," I said.

The pure blues voice was low and sorrowful, but strong enough to ride over the crackling, popping surface noise that buried most of the backing combo.

When the record was over, Hensman lifted the tone arm gingerly. He flicked off the stereo and looked back at me, waiting for a reaction. We had met in a jazz bar two years earlier and had been getting together to play records about once a week ever since. It was a Saturday night and this week we were at his place.

When I still didn't say anything, he said, "You know how I klutz these things up. A real social magician. I love their music but I'll be damned if I can relate to the people. The place was closed for business but I did talk to the owner. He couldn't or wouldn't tell me a thing. He denied even knowing a Stomper Crawford."

"But, Carl, how can you be so sure it *was* Crawford?"

"I'm not sure," he admitted, some of the excitement returning. "But isn't it worth a follow-up? You're a private detective, O'Dair. Stuff like this is your business. And think of what it could mean if it was him — if you do track him down.

"I've been sitting on that money for three years, waiting for the right artist to come along. So I look out of a bus window and who do I see stepping into a bar? *Damn!* If I could record Stomper Crawford, it would be the blues rediscovery of the century!"

"Or decade. But it was a moving bus, Carl. Stomper Crawford hasn't recorded since '59. It's been longer than that since his last publicity picture. He could look like a different person by now."

"So then I'm wrong, and all we have are our records. Just what we started with. Nothing more, nothing less."

There was no way I could argue that one. There was no way I wanted to. I told him so, and that I might as well get right on it. The bars uptown would be in full swing. That might make things easier.

"Be sure to call me as soon as you learn anything," he mother-henned on the way to the door. "Don't worry about the hour. And tell him we'll record him with any sidemen he likes. Any type of material he likes, too. I'd like to recut some of the old stuff, but it would be terrific if we had some new songs, too."

"What was the name of that bar?"

"*Leon's.* On Thirty-fourth. I wasn't but four minutes behind him but he couldn't be found."

"Okay," I said. "I'm on my way. I'll check the place out."

"And remember, O'Dair — don't forget to call me when you've found him. No matter what the hour."

"I'll remember, Carl."

Leon's, on Thirty-fourth, was in the heart of the city's black section. It had been a long time since the open hostilities and riots of the late sixties and early seventies. But the faces along the sidewalks and tenement steps still smoothed impassively, cautiously, at the sight of a white.

But I'd worked these neighborhoods in the hungry days when bail bondsmen had been my clients. When someone had jumped, it was my job to bring them back. I knew my way around, and I still had friends.

Leon Miller had saved my life once and we had stayed in touch. His round black face lit up when I took a seat at his bar.

"*O'Dair,* my man! Long time no *see,* brother. I was beginning to think you were either dead or married!"

"Just busy, Leon. How've you been?"

We kicked around the conversational ball for awhile. The place was busy with a Saturday night crowd and the walls, hidden somewhere beyond the swirling haze of cigarette smoke, throbbed to the pulsating disco from the jukebox and the constant din of raised voices. It took a while for

me to get around to why I was there. Finally, there was a break in the action and we got some time to sit at the end of the bar over a couple of beers.

"A guy came in here this afternoon," I said. "A white guy. He was looking for Stomper Crawford."

Leon's face clouded in the dimness.

"Stomp Crawford? Now that goes *back*, man. Stomp was one of the big ones in the old days before he dropped out of sight."

"This white guy looks like Woody Allen. Acts like him, too. Says he's sure he saw Stomper coming in here this afternoon about five. He talked to someone. I guess that was you."

"It was me." He grinned. "That boy looked like his mommy just dropped him off all alone on the wrong end of town. But I told him the truth, O'Dair. Stomper wasn't in here today. No way."

"He's pretty sure, Leon."

Leon's voice lowered to make a point. I had to lean forward to catch his words.

"I'm telling it to you like it is, O'Dair. Me and Stomp Crawford go way back together, man. He used to play here all the time. I'm married to his cousin. Wouldn't anyone be gladder to see Stomper than me. But Stomper Crawford disappeared eight years ago and ain't been heard from since. Left his band, his family, everyone else high and dry, and that's a natural fact."

"Okay, Leon. Thanks. If he ever does walk in the door, give me a call, okay?"

"You'll be the first to know, baby. The first to know."

We shook on it and I edged my way out of the club. People parted slowly. There were one or two "excuse me's." But no smiles.

Outside, the pavement still radiated the heat of summer's sun even though it was well past eleven p.m. The street was alive. Bright colors and the latest fashions paraded by to the music of powerful gunning exhausts and the calls of young men to the ladies.

I moved up the sidewalk and around the corner to where I'd parked my car a half block down on a cross street. The nighttime symphony at my back receded with each step until the darkness around me was almost silent again.

I was fitting my key into the lock when I heard the scuffling of feet as they rushed me from behind, from the opposite curb. I started to turn but they were on me by then. A savage kick from the side knocked my ankles out from below. When I came up a moment later I was being pulled and held by a dude from behind while the guy in front went to work.

He must have done time in the ring when he wasn't beating people up on the street. Black,

dressed in black, he was a blur in the night as he danced before me, stiff-arming left and right killer punches that popped me like hammer blows.

"We don't like competition, honky," snarled the one in front as a right from way back made my knees buckle. Things started swimming. "Go home and don't come back. Forget Stomper Crawford, dig?"

The one holding me stepped back and I slumped. The whole thing had taken less than thirty seconds and hardly made any noise. I hit the pavement like a kid's forgotten marionette. Only I wasn't forgotten. I knew what would come next. These guys wanted to put me out of commission.

I gazed along at the level of the sidewalk. I saw the toe of the fighter's right shoe pull back for the kick that would end the job. But there wasn't a damn thing I could do about it. The professional beating had left me paralyzed with pain. I'd be able to move in a minute or two, but a lot of good that would do me now.

Then there was someone with us. A third someone, who came thundering down the street at us from the direction of the club.

"Hey, what's going on?" a voice shouted.

The foot rested. The fighter held his ground.

"Beat it, brother. This is a private argument."

But the curious voice kept coming and in another instant there was a full-scale brawl going on over my head, and these guys weren't playing. I heard a fist sink into someone's gut and push the wind out. A body slammed back into a car, my car. Another punch into another body. Again. Someone grunted in pain. Someone swore. Then two pairs of feet slapping away on the pavement, disappearing into the night.

Things were starting to fade back into focus but the pain was still there, and it would get worse. I knew that from experience.

The guy helping me to my feet wasn't much into his twenties, if that. He was good looking, lithe, with that muscular wiriness a black man needs to survive in the ghetto.

"You all right, mister?"

I leaned back against the car.

"Yeah, I'm all right, or most of me is. Thanks. That's one I owe you."

"That's okay. You got me curious back there in the club, so I followed you out. I heard you were looking for Stomper Crawford."

"You heard right. Can you help me find him?"

"Maybe. My name is Isaac Crawford. Stomper's my old man."

HE HAD GAINED about forty pounds and had gone through a

lot of pain since his heyday in the early fifties. I remembered the old publicity photos I had seen reproduced in the blues history books. Stomper Crawford had been young, wild, hungry, eager to please. His eyes and smile had flashed with the knowledge that he was Number One on the charts of what were then called "race records."

Now he was tired. He sat on the sagging couch in the apartment living room. The old two-strap undershirt rode down over the bulge of his stomach, its whiteness in stark contrast to the ebony of his skin. He wore an expression of weary resignation.

"A man just can't stay on the run forever. Eight years was long enough, traveling from town to town, working odd jobs." He glanced in the direction of his son, who sat beside him. "I've got my roots here. And my son Isaac don't think poorly of me for having ducked trouble all that time."

Side by side, you knew they were father and son. Isaac could have doubled for those old publicity shots. Young, wild, hungry. But not so eager to please.

"Thing is, we don't need an outsider messing things up," he told me pointedly. His stare was as blunt as his words.

The aches from the rough-housing back on the street were all but forgotten now. I was still trying to believe that finding Crawford had been this easy. But it's like that sometimes. It was like that now.

I looked at Crawford, Senior. Surviving the hard times had given him the kind of silent dignity you often find in black men of his age. He wasn't the type you spoke around as if he weren't there.

"I don't understand how you think I could gum things up," I said. "If anything, I've confirmed for you what were only suspicions before. You came back not knowing if there'd be people after you. I drew them out. Now you know. That should count for something."

"It does," agreed the old man. "That's why Isaac brought you here to see me. Now you understand. Now you can go back and tell your producer friend and he'll understand, too. Right now I've got all the help I'll need, Mr. O'Dair. Isaac's a good son. He'll see me through. Maybe then we can talk business. I'd like to talk business now, but—"

He ended with an expressive shrug. He appreciated by coming by, my offer of assistance, but blood was thicker.

I looked at Isaac.

"How do you intend to help your father?"

"My group has this block and the ten square blocks around it." The response was heavy with a young man's macho pride. "Dad's going to start his comeback by

playing the local clubs again. Leon's already said he could play at his place."

"Is that what you were doing there this afternoon?" I asked Stomper. "Lining up a gig?"

Stomper nodded.

"Leon was surprised as hell to see me after all these years." He chuckled. "I told him to keep it under his hat until I got things square away. I guess he did."

Right, I thought. Leon was married to Stomper's cousin. Blood was always thicker. So is race. At least it had been between Leon and me.

I glanced back at Isaac. There was nothing even resembling trust in his eyes but he was keeping it inside in deference to his parent.

"Is it safe to expose your father like that?" I asked. "Those two guys tonight were pros. They could get luckier when it comes to your old man. There could be more of them."

The angry face tightened.

"Let those dudes try for my father in my own territory. They're welcome to what we'll lay on them."

Stomper read my expression.

"Don't get the idea my Isaac's in some neighborhood gang," he justified. "It's a Neighborhood Action Group, they call it. There's a whole world of difference. They've done plenty for this neighborhood — food relief, a day-care center for kids whose folks have got to work, helping out teenagers on dope. They're the new generation. They've got new ideas and the energy to back them up."

"No one's questioning their motives," I said. "But wasting whoever comes around to waste you is the wrong way to work it. Think of it. Your comeback and that violence will go hand-in-hand. Something like that always follows you, Stomper."

"We take care of our own on this end of town." Isaac bristled defiantly.

"It's something that could always be dug up and used against you." I pressed the old man. "What this guy Hensman is offering you is a legitimate comeback. A ticket back into the recording studio. You've already got the name from the old days. Your 78's are reissued all the time. People are starved for something new by Stomper Crawford. Let Hensman produce a session. He'll put up the money but it'll be your show. He'll market the tapes to a label and you're in business again."

Isaac had heard enough.

"Yeah, right out where some sucker can nail him. I say we start small. Isolate whoever it is. Nail *them!* Then Dad will be free to do whatever he wants without having to look over his shoulder all his life. But we've got to do it here in the neighborhood where I can keep things covered. We're strong

here. Out there we're vulnerable."

"By 'out there' you mean out of the ghetto. The ghetto is where the trouble started — remember, Isaac?" I looked back at Stomper. "Run it by me one more time," I suggested. "Maybe Isaac and I can both help."

"Maybe you can at that," the old man nodded. "But I don't see what good going over it again would do. You think I haven't been over it enough during the past eight years to last me a lifetime? But it was dark. I didn't see a thing and that's the God's truth. I just wish these bad dudes would believe me."

His eyes got a faraway look. "I was the King of the Blues, is what they called me. Then Rock & Roll came in and the young kids who bought the records didn't want to hear us oldtimers anymore. But if I wasn't a star, I could still draw them in my own neighborhood. Yessir, in the bars around here they *knew* how good my band was! Yes indeed. But then some joker with a fast knife had to take that away from me, too."

"You saw a man get wasted in the alley out back of Leon's while you were taking a break," I said. "Didn't Leon ever get curious and try to follow it up?"

"Follow what up?" He sighed. "Whoever did it split when they saw my shadow, but they must have hung around. I went over and saw that the dude they'd left behind was dead — his throat was cut ear to ear — and I went back inside to get Leon.

"By the time I found him and we got back out there again, the stiff was gone. Those boys knew their business. Two held him and the third did the cutting, and they cleaned up after themselves real neat and tidy when they were done. Wasn't a damn thing to call the cops about!"

"Not that they'd have given a damn," growled Isaac. "It's a tough couple of blocks down there after dark. Hookers, pimps, pushers, guys on junk. A lot of heavy stuff goes down. It could have been anything, what Dad saw. The cops don't like to come up to this end of town unless they have to."

"Somebody thought you saw some faces," I reminded Stomper, as if he needed reminding. "The cops could have helped on that."

Stomper treated that remark as being too foolish — or idealistic — to deserve a response.

"I should have kept my mouth shut," he said, as if still not sure why he hadn't. "But I told some of the cats on the bandstand before the next set started. Word gets around."

"So someone started throwing bullets at you the next day and after two near misses you decided it was time to split town. Now it's eight years later and you're back — and you're right where you

were before you left if you start haunting the old neighborhood and playing the same old bars. I'm offering you a way out of that, Stomper."

"My father is through running, O'Dair." That was Isaac. The growl had become a snarl. He turned to his father, his voice heavy with emotion. "Dad, send this dude back downtown where he belongs. He'll bring you nothing but trouble. Let me handle this for you like we agreed. You know I can do it."

"I know you can, son," said the old man slowly. "But you've got to admit there's some sense to what Mr. O'Dair says. If we're vulnerable outside the ghetto, so are the boys who are after me. You did say you were a private detective, Mr. O'Dair?"

"I did and I am. Consider me your bodyguard, if you want me. Call it a payment for all the good times I've had listening to your records. Every time I ever played one, I'd wonder what happened to you. Now that we've found you, I'll keep you healthy. If something did happen to you now and Isaac didn't do me in, Carl Hensman probably would. That's a lot of incentive to keep you breathing."

The younger Crawford was suddenly on his feet. He knew which way the conversation was heading and he didn't like it. His hands were clenched and you could almost feel the heat of his anger.

"Ever since mama died it's been just you and me," he snarled at his father. "All the time you were gone, whenever you wrote me, I always kept quiet about where you were, just like you said. You came back and I've kept quiet about that, too. All to help you.

"So now you throw in with the first honky dude off the street who walks in with a smooth line. How do you know *he* isn't one of them? Haven't you been ripped off enough by every white man you ever signed a recording contract with? Isn't that enough for you? Your record sales bought them Cadillacs while your own family had to wear rags. But you still fall for the same jive!"

"That'll be enough talk like that, Isaac. I respect Mr. O'Dair as an honest man and there's truth to what he's saying. I don't see why the three of us can't work together on this."

"Because I don't work with the enemy," Isaac told him. Then he turned the snarl and the glare on me. "If anything happens to my father, I'm laying it on *your* shoulders, man. I'll find you and kill you with my bare hands."

He spun on his heels and was gone, the door slamming behind him, the heat of his anger seeming to remain — a brittle, almost tangible thing in the sudden stillness of the room.

Stomper Crawford gazed at

the front door which his son had slammed. He seemed even more tired than before and when he spoke it was as if he were reciting the lyrics to a new blues song.

"*Damn!* It looks like I'm gaining a career and losing a son. *Damn . . .* "

STOMPER WOULDN'T leave the apartment that night. He told me that it was Isaac's place. He wanted to wait until Isaac came back. They had to have a talk. So I called Hensman from there and told him the news. It sounded for a while like he was going to have a cardiac arrest. Then I put Stomper on and they talked for nearly a half hour.

Stomper told Carl only that he had "personal problems" and that he wouldn't be able to get together until tomorrow, Sunday. Carl finally bought that and they agreed to meet at his place tomorrow morning at eleven. Bright and early, for a Sunday.

I stayed with Stomper that night, sitting up with him in his son's living room, sharing a bottle of whisky and listening to tales — some of them tall, I imagine — about the good old days of the fifties when Stomper and his rollicking band had made blues history both in the recording studios and on a series of high-living around-the-year tours on the road.

I drifted off about three, still listening to him reminisce, both of us lazy and loose from the drinking, me feeling vaguely pleased with myself for my part in rediscovering a blues legend. . .

Isaac didn't show up that night, and by the time Stomper and I departed for Carl's at a little past ten-thirty the next morning, you could see that it was weighing heavily on the old man's mind. He had aged years during the night. But then I probably wasn't looking too hot myself. I felt like hell.

Stomper Crawford and Carl Hensman, worlds apart in life style and upbringing, became best friends the moment they met, drawn together by a deep love of and commitment to the blues, as well as by the knowledge on Stomper's part that Carl not only *could* but *would* help. The two don't always go together. Not in the world of Stomper Crawfords.

Carl had to hear the whole story straight from Stomper's lips and you could tell that the tale fascinated him. Stomper's story was, for sure, the stuff of blues legend. Living legend. Top of the Rhythm & Blues charts all during the fifties.

Pushed out by Rock & Roll. Back to playing the neighborhood juke joints that had sprawled him. Then even that taken away eight years ago when he witnessed murder — what had seemed to be a very professional hit. Now he was back and things were happen-

ing to him again.

I figured Stomper was safe at Carl's for the time being. I had kept my eyes open and no one had followed us there. So when the two of them got to talking business, forgetting that I was even around, I cut out for about an hour and spent my time nosing around uptown again.

Back to the ghetto.

Looking and asking . . .

I had a surprise waiting for me when I got back to Carl's. Carl and the bluesman were waiting at the curb and they wasted no time in climbing into the front seat with me.

"Where to, guys?"

There was a moment's hesitation. Then Carl spoke, and you could tell that he knew I wouldn't like it.

"Stomper wants to go down to *Leon's,*" he said. "They're closed this afternoon but he's going to have a private jam with some of his old sidemen. They're meeting us down there. Leon's making the calls."

We stayed at the curb. I tried to keep the exasperation out of my voice.

"Wait a minute, Stomper. The whole rift with Isaac last night was over how I wanted to get you *out* of the ghetto."

He'd been staring out the front windshield. Now he turned to me.

"*You* wait a minute," he said, without rancor but firmly. "*I'm* the man making the comeback. *I'm* the man who's going to decide how it's done. I'm too old to make a fool out of myself in public, O'Dair. I'm with you on everything you said last night. But it won't mean a thing if the *feel* isn't there anymore. Understand?"

"I tried to talk him out of it," put in Carl, next to the door, but it was obvious that he thought the idea was terrific.

I knew when I was licked.

So we were on our way back to the club . . . back into the belly of the inner city.

It was a quiet drive. Carl sensed my disapproval, but he was still flushed with that peculiar excitement of which only a truly fanatical music lover is capable. Stomper was silent, somber, staring out through the windshield as if he were seeing, or worrying about, more than the mild Sunday traffic.

I had a few worries of my own. I understood Stomper's side of it. I only wished he would understand mine. He had the natural apprehension any artist feels upon returning to an art he has left untouched for years. But I was worried about the fact that I was driving him back to the scene where all his troubles had begun. At least, the problems involving violence and sudden death.

I was also worried about the fact that I was unarmed. The .357

I sometimes carry was back in my apartment. I hadn't been wearing it when I'd showed up at Carl's last night for our record listening, and I hadn't slowed down since.

I felt very naked. But I tried not to think about that . . .

Leon's was three steps below street level, sandwiched in at midblock by a squat line of business fronts to either side. Thirty-fourth Street had a completely different feel from last night. Then it had throbbed with the excitement of the night scene. Now the midafternoon sun beat down and the windows of closed businesses stared back at us like the blank eyes of drunks on the morning after.

There was no traffic on the sidewalks and little on the street. I pulled up at the curb and the three of us piled out and across the sidewalk and down the narrow cement steps. Stomper tried the door. It was locked. He pounded a meaty fist on the metal and he waited. I caught Carl's glance over the bluesman's shoulder. Carl gave me an excited wink. The door opened.

Leon's round face burst into pure joy when he spotted Stomper on his doorstep. They threw their arms around each other — two happy men, slapping wildly, oblivious to anyone watching.

"It's my main man and he's gonna do it again!" Leon laughed.

"You're the first one here, man. The other cats are on their way. Fall in and have some drinks!"

"Sounds good to me, brother," said Stomper. "You know O'Dair and Carl Hensman?"

"Hell yeah, how're you doing, O'Dair?" That came at me with a wide infectious grin. To Carl, "Welcome back to my club, my man. Let's go downstairs and get this party rolling!"

You'd never guess that he was a man faced with the evidence he had lied to me last night or to Carl yesterday afternoon. But things were moving too smoothly to bring that up now.

We moved into the low-ceilinged tavern. It had that ghostly quiet all bars somehow acquire during off hours. But Leon's chatter seemed to warm the place up as we seated ourselves around a table and Leon served a round of drinks. Beer for the three of us, coke for Carl.

Then Leon surprised me by bringing up what I had avoided.

"Hope there aren't any bad feelings about me bending the truth a little when you fellas came around looking for Stomper," he opened.

"No hard feelings here, Leon," I told him. "I gave it some thought. I'd have done the same if Stomper had asked me."

"No hard feelings at all," Carl added. "I'm just glad we're making this thing happen. It's really an historical event!"

Carl talks like that sometimes.

"I just hope it *does* happen," said, Stomper, half to himself. "I've been away from music for a long time, y'know."

"Hell, you'll sound fine," Leon assured him. "Hey, Stomp, old Lefty Dugan's one of the cats coming down this aft. Remember the time the three of us went to that party over on Forty-second—"

With that they were off on an animated tangent regarding what Stomper's old crowd was up to these days.

Carl and I let the two of them carry the conversation — Carl eagerly absorbing these insights into the black culture behind the music he loved, me just happy to see Stomper relaxing, losing his troubles in talk. The tenseness I had noticed since late night seemed to be fading. If only temporarily, his troubles with Isaac appeared to be forgotten.

They had been at it for about fifteen minutes when we heard the front door creak open. All eyes turned expectantly toward the entranceway as two sets of feet scuffled down unseen steps.

I caught a side glance of Stomper Crawford. He seemed truly alive for the first time since we had met. A vein twitched at his neck, as if expectantly.

But the two dudes who came through the archway into the club weren't musicians. Their black faces were frozen masks, not friendly at all. They held guns and the guns were aimed at us.

I recognized the one on the right. He was the guy who had handed me the professional shellacking on the street the night before. His partner must have held me. Now they were back for more.

Stomper, Carl and I looked back at Leon simultaneously. The smile had left Leon's round face. His eyes held the life and feeling of shiny black marbles. His right fist was filled with a heavy .45 automatic that was leveled at all of us but on me in particular.

"It makes sense now," I said softly. "We're the only ones besides you who know that Stomper is back, right, Leon? Except for Isaac, that is."

"That young buck will be easy enough to nail," said Leon with no emotion whatsoever.

Stomper Crawford half rose from his chair. His fists were clenched into angry knots.

"If you touch a hand to that boy, Leon, so help me, I'll—"

The words seemed to be cut off and forced back down his throat as Leon shifted the .45 slightly.

"You'll do nothing, Stomper," Leon told him. "You'll be dead. I know you didn't recognize me when you saw me cut that dude in the alley that night. But a thing like that implants itself in a man's mind. He thinks about it for the rest of his life.

"Someday you might see something about me, some way I

moved, anything, and it would make you think of that killer in the alley. I just couldn't wait for that to happen, Stomp. The people I run things for don't like complications."

Next to me, Carl Hensman's face was fish-belly white. There was no excitement in his voice now. Only quavering fear.

"What the hell's going to happen to us?" he asked anyone who would answer.

"Leon's going to wipe the slate clean," I told him. "As far as anyone else is concerned, Stomper Crawford is still missing. He never came back. Who was that guy you killed, Leon? Some rival pusher?"

"Something like that. The people I work for call it 'making your bones.' I had to waste the dude if I wanted my own concession. It was worth it, O'Dair. I've got a nice profitable operation here. Any high the customer wants, for a price."

"And I thought I knew my way around uptown."

"It's too bad you had to stick your nose in," he said. "I sent my boys out last night to, uh, persuade you to let things be. But you always were a stubborn son. Now I've got to waste you, too."

He said it almost as if he meant it . . . almost. Then he rose to his feet, snapping his head briefly toward the back door leading out of the place, down beyond the end of the bar. "Let's go. Line up behind each other and move it very slow."

They could have killed us there and they might have, had it been night. But gunfire would travel on a lazy Sunday afternoon and might draw too many questions and too many cops. Even at this end of town.

We filed toward the door as we were told. There was nothing else we could do. Except to watch for a break and when it came, to grab it.

Carl would be next to useless in any action that went down — that was obvious. He was between Stomper and me, practically in shock. From behind, I could see that Stomper was walking with a sort of wound-up tenseness, that he was waiting for a break, too. But we were facing three guns, and you always have to be careful around guns.

Then we were stepping up into the sunshine again, this time into the alley behind *Leon's* where it had all begun. A shiny Lincoln stood waiting. Everything was silent except for our footsoles on the pavement. The city could have been a million miles beyond the walls of the alley.

Leon motioned again. This time with his .45, toward the back seat of the Lincoln.

"Get in and don't wast time or I start blowing off kneecaps," he said, and his eyes told us that he meant it.

That was when the break came.

It was more of a blitzkrieg than a break. A kaleidoscope of movement. Flashes of descending commando-like outfits. Black. Black on black. The cries of an attacking army. Rushing. Moving. They came from the roofs on both sides of the alley . . . at least ten of them, but it seemed like more, they were so fast. They sailed into the men with the guns and everything changed. Suddenly it was a free-for-all.

I saw Isaac Crawford, lithe and angry as ever, taking care of the big dude who had pounded me last night. Isaac was half the guy's weight, but a few finely executed Kung Fu moves sent the big man spinning into a brick wall.

There were more at the other end of the alley. Isaac Crawford's Neighborhood Action Group may have been the cavalry to the rescue, but the scene wasn't secured yet.

The other of Leon's two helpers was putting up a mighty struggle and it looked as if he might make it out of the alley. But he had dropped his gun. I saw Stomper pick it up, work his way around behind the guy and brain him with it, hard, and that was that . . .

Leaving my attention free for Leon, the rat I had always considered a friend. Some of Isaac's pals had almost had him down but foul knee kicks had cleared them away. Now he was aiming through the crowd at the other end of the alley, and I knew without checking that the .45 was drawing a bead on the back of Stomper Crawford's head.

I sailed into Leon with a low tackle, my left pushing his gun up while my right and the body behind it and the force of the tackle sent him pitching down with me. The .45 blasted into the air over my head, instantly followed by the sound, almost as loud, of Leon's head slapping the pavement. A very satisfying sound. Then he was still.

I leaned back on my haunches, caught my breath and looked down at him. He wasn't dead, but he wasn't going anywhere. He was out cold.

A friendly arm helped me to my feet. It was Isaac. Stomper and Carl stood beside him. In the background, the young men of Isaac's Neighborhood Action Group were keeping a tight ring around the other two. They weren't going anywhere, either.

Sirens were approaching from the distance, beyond the canyon walls of the alley. I looked at Isaac.

"Thanks for keeping that part of the bargain," I said. "You didn't have to call the police."

"You didn't have to use yourself as bait. But did you think things were going to break this fast?"

I shook my head.

"Leon caught me napping," I admitted. "But it fits now. Stomper had trouble finding him

in the club that night after the kill. The reason was that Leon was coming in via the front door from the alley. This afternoon we thought he was setting up a jam session, but the only people he called were his two hoods."

Stomper Crawford had regained most of his composure. He didn't look like a man who had just been skullbusting in an alley. He had regained his quiet basic dignity, too.

"Would anyone mind explaining what just went down here?" he asked.

The question was directed to both of us, but Isaac fielded it.

"O'Dair found me this afternoon while you were at Carl's," he said. "He rapped some sense into my fool head. He convinced me that we could work together. He was your bodyguard but he's white and he knew that wouldn't stop anybody on this end of town. It wasn't supposed to.

"The guys in the Group and I have been keeping back, following you since you left Carl's, Dad. You had enough on your mind without worrying about security. Even the rift last night helped. It gave me a reason for not being on the scene. O'Dair thought that might help things to happen. I guess it did."

Stomper Crawford looked at me and then all of the weariness was gone. His eyes burned with the same spark that had illuminated those old publicity photos when he had been King of the Blues. Only there was something else now, too, and I think it was for me.

I think it was respect.

"It doesn't sound like you were napping at all, O'Dair," he said. "I want to thank both you and my son for saving my life."

Then he turned the look on Isaac. The close father-son bond was still there. But now there was respect of one *man* for another, and that meant a lot to both of them . . .

Carl Hensman finally broke the spell. He was still pale, but recovering fast.

"Well, uh, now that Leon's out of the way," he said, almost as if there weren't converging cops and bruised bodies all over the place, "d'you think we can start making plans for a real jam session? Stomper, I think we ought to—"

I interrupted with a laugh that wouldn't stay down.

"Stomper," I said, "You stick with these guys, hear? Isaac is right about not trusting anybody. With an attitude like that, he'll make you a fine agent. And a producer with a one-track mind never hurt anybody."

"I believe you're right." Stomper nodded sagely, looking from his son to his number-one fan. "I believe these boys could make old Stomper a blues king all over again."

He was right.

That's exactly what they did.

Audition For Murder

by JILL LASKER

The Thespians Were Geared for Makebelieve Crime. However, Dealing with the Reality Required Unrehearsed Courage.

SHORTLY BEFORE 11 a.m. on most Tuesdays and Fridays, you can stand outside a particular converted church in New York's Hell's Kitchen and watch a procession of figures rush through the black iron gate, down the stairs to the basement and through a door tucked under the broad front steps.

Some arrive by limousine and are wrapped in furs; others come by foot and are clothed in shabby jeans, shawls and scuffed boots. They are members of the famous Thespians' Company, taking part in a session under the guidance of the world-renowned director, Aaron Agone.

The white-painted facade of the two-story building gleams in the midst of the tenement squalor like the single remaining tooth in a hag's smile. The double doors at the top of the wide flight of outside stairs are locked and there is no bell.

A small, modest sign to the left of the basement door reads — ENTRANCE: *The actor's career develops in public, but his art develops in private.* — Goethe. It is as effective as a KEEP OUT sign in discouraging casual visitors. Privacy is guarded fiercely. However, once a month, the door is opened to any actor who wishes to audition for membership in The Thespians' Company.

One Tuesday last February, three of us were in the basement office coping with the storm that swirls around such auditions. Outside, nature was busy con-

structing the perfect stage set for an act of foul play.

In the morning, the rain fell in the torrents of water meant for drowning. By noon, a freezing thunderous wind turned the rain into sleet. At three p.m. Manhattan was smothered in a claustrophobic fog that cleared the streets of most pedestrians and traffic.

Marcia Gorman, Thespians' Company secretary, was on the phone, trying to placate an actor who had just heard he had not passed last week's preliminary audition. Glory Spring, Hollywood superstar and founding member of the Company, was on another phone, seeking members to act as judges in the upcoming finals. And I was stuck with the jig saw puzzle task of fitting time slots to applicants.

I heard Marcia saying, "But you can take another audition next year! No, not this year . . . that's the rule. No, there was nothing wrong with your material. I can't tell you who the judges were. Look, the odds for passing your first preliminary are about the same as for landing a Broadway part your first time out. Nothing personal about it. Listen, take my advice. Try again next year. Bye."

"Good girl. You handled it well," I said.

"Yeah, sure. I feel like a crumb. That guy was crying."

Marcia was young, street-wise and an experienced stage-manager but, like most of us, vulnerable to the pain of the rejected. She had one elbow on the desk, her chin cupped in her hand. With the other she was busily making ringlets out of her curly mass of dark-blonde hair. Her pretty face was drawn. Everything in the day's atmosphere seemed to be working against her ebullient disposition.

Glory wasn't in a good mood either, but gloom and doom were her natural habitats, which would have surprised her fans. She slammed down her phone.

"Mark won't change his mind. He said it again, 'I won't put myself in the position of passing judgment on my fellow actors' talent.' Such garbage! If we'd all felt that way, he wouldn't be a member of the Company because there wouldn't have been anyone to audition *him.*"

Twenty years ago, a press agent had dubbed her Miss Breath of Spring and she played roles perpetuating the image of brainless beauty. She had earned two Academy Awards despite this handicap and was greatly respected by her peers. Her grasp of the intellectual side of her craft was firm. Glory was Aaron Agone's disciple and had some ideas of her own on The Method.

She shivered and pulled her mink coat tight around her like a bathrobe. "I hate New York.

I always catch cold when I'm here. Why don't you come back to L.A. with me, Kate? It's a better place to recuperate than this town."

Glory was a good friend but too egocentric for me to discuss my recent hospital trauma with her. I said, "Do you like my hair gone grey, Glory?'

"Should get you some commercials. I hear there's a big demand for 'older women' now," she answered.

"I hate it," Marcia volunteered. "It makes you look like my mother."

"That can't be all bad, darling." I laughed. I stopped the work I was doing and asked, "Anyone want a cup of fresh coffee? I'm going to get some for myself."

Before either of them answered, a series of tremendous thuds shook the ceiling.

"Just Marion Janney and Bill Bear throwing some furniture around. They're working one the 'Medea' again," Marcia said. "And okay on the coffee. Black, please."

Glory said, "Nothing for me. I'm dieting."

Neither of us laughed, although we knew her answer would have been "sure," if it had been pizza I was offering. Glory was sensitive about the extra pounds that haunted her but impulsive and indulgent about her appetite for anything Italian, including men.

"Is Jim Reilly still using the library? I want to talk to him before he leaves," Glory said.

Marcia answered. "He and Ron Kahn — and I think Phil Ricci — are doing a reading in there. They're scheduled until four, anyway. What do you want with Jim?"

Marcia's question was a shade too throw-away, I thought. I'd noticed there was a relationship developing between them. Jim was an intense, ambitious young actor who looked like a Madison Avenue executive and behaved like a 42nd St. pimp. Marcia was going to be used and abused.

But there was nothing I could do about it as long as they were discreet. And that they were. Aaron Agone set few rules for the Company but one was that the secretary was not to get involved with any of the members. Marcia's predecessor had married one and lost her job.

Glory's answer to Marcia was brief and direct. "Aaron thinks he's 'on' something. The scene he did this morning . . . it was brilliant. But Aaron doesn't think he can sustain it and neither do I. Isn't Jim working on it for an important screen test?"

Marcia nodded and looked miserable. She knew something she wasn't telling us. And she wasn't going to. All she said was, "It's so quiet. Maybe they left. Want me to knock on the door?"

Glory shook her head. "Not that urgent. I'll be here until 4:30. Kate and I are having dinner together before the Board meeting at Aaron's house. You never get anything but tea and cookies at the Agones'," she grumbled.

I rose and stretched. All of our dispositions would be improved by coffee and whatever else I could find in the kitchen.

At the open door way from the office to the vestibule leading to the street entrance, I paused and turned back. My eye had been caught by two objects on the top of a chin-high filing cabinet. As an active member of the Housekeeping Committee, I was constantly at war with the members who left props from scenes in the office instead of putting them in a closet provided for the purpose.

The cabinet was right next to the office door and I could visualize the casual disposal. I hadn't attended this morning's session, so I didn't know whose props these were. A revolver and a woolen ski mask. I'd have to ask Marcia who had used a revolver in the scene this morning.

Marcia is a darling, but a congenital slob. She is absolutely no help in this department. And the ski mask wouldn't help identify the culprit.

One of our members had bought a carton full of identical ski masks wholesale, and had sold one to anyone who had fifty cents. The result was that it had become this winter's version of the old school tie. *Oh, forget it,* I told myself. There's enought tension in this room, without adding to it!

I turned back and went on to the kitchen. As I poured coffee from the urn, I reproached myself. Idleness was turning me into a den mother. I didn't like the role. But then, I didn't like the gun and the possibility of drugs around the Company either.

My thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the street door slamming open and shut. An angry exchange from the office echoed through the empty room between us. It didn't disturb me. It wasn't that unusual. Besides, I was carrying a hot cup brimful of coffee in each hand, and that's where my concentration was. I passed over the threshold of the office before I looked up. The room was still.

Glory's face, white and drawn, was the first thing I saw. I looked to my left, straight into the gun that was pointed at my head.

The coffee sloshed over. Behind the gun was a young man in one of those ski masks and a navy peajacket, with hands that shook.

"May I put these down?" I asked. He nodded.

I turned to the file cabinet and placed the coffee cups on top. The gun that had been there was gone. But the ski mask was still there. I took a deep breath and calculated that I was "dealing

from strength." If it was the prop gun he was pointing at me, it couldn't have any bullets in it.

"What is it you want? Money?" I asked.

He jerked his head in Marcia's direction and said, "*You* tell her!"

Marcia said, "He says he auditioned last week and we sent him a letter saying he didn't pass. The guy he did the audition with got the letter saying he could take the final audition. He wants one of those letters. If we don't give it to him, he's going to take one of us hostage."

"And that's you, lady! Cause you were one of the judges for my audition, weren't you?"

I had been a judge the previous week, but I couldn't place this young man in the context of any scene I remembered. I was preoccupied with the fear that he would realize Glory was a much bigger prize as a hostage. I tried not to look at her. I knew she must have had the same thought.

"Marcia, why don't you take this young man's name and address and send him a final audition letter. After all, he's doing a rather good job of a scene from *'Dog Day Afternoon.'* That *is* what you're doing, isn't it? Sort of taking a second audition right now?"

He was quiet for a moment and I couldn't tell what was going on under the mask. "No ma'am, that's not what I had in mind. I just wanted the same letter my partner got. But I've changed my mind. You're trying to trick me and I don't like that.

"What I like is that you're afraid of me. I really like that. You're feeling bad, like I felt when I got that letter. And you'll feel even worse if I shoot Miss Glory Spring all scrunched up in that chair over there."

Glory was remarkably quiet and composed. *She really has guts*, I thought. I knew what I had to do. I needed to be sure of one thing first.

"Where did you get that gun?" I demanded. "That looks like Company property to me!" I prayed Marcia would pick up the cue. She did.

"It's the one Jim used in his scene this morning," Marcia said. "This guy grabbed it off the top of the cabinet during our argument."

Okay. It was a prop gun then, and all he could do was hit me over the head with it. We needed the police.

I lunged for the phone. He grabbed my wrist so fast, I spun around. He let go, and I ran for the door and screamed, *"Bill, Ron, somebody! Help!"*

He came at me and stuck the gun in my ribs.

Bill came hurtling down the stairs. Ron, Jim and Phil were suddenly in the doorway. He pushed me in back of him and waved the gun at the four men, keeping them outside the office.

Jim moved first. The other three men followed him. They surrounded the guy in the mask. And just stood there. Ensemble work.

He crumpled. He dropped the gun and sank to his haunches. He pushed the mask off his head and cried, big, wrenching sobs.

Bill broke the circle. He opened the street door. It had gotten dark and the wind and the rain whipped into the vestibule.

"Get the hell out of here before I beat the crap out of you!" Bill said.

He picked himself up. Now we could see his baby face. I remembered. He didn't pass the audition because we were all sure he couldn't be more than sixteen. He brushed his nose onto his sleeve, turned to Marcia and said, "I'm gonna take your advice. I'll be back next year." And he ran past Bill and out into the street.

Ron said, "You all right, Glory? Maybe we should have turned him over to the police. What the hell was it all about anyway?"

"Maybe we ought to change the audition system, Kate, huh?" Glory said.

I shook my head. "Aaron wouldn't do that."

"You're right. Not even over my dead body," Glory said.

Marcia, Glory and I laughed so hard the men thought we were hysterical. Which we probably were. Ron disappeared and reappeared with a bottle of wine. It was welcomed.

Marion Janney came down the stairs, still buttoning her blouse. As though it were dialogue from one of her movies, she twanged out in her famous brassy voice, "Tell me, what did I miss? It had better be rape or I ain't gonna be nice about havin' my rehearsal disrupted!"

Jim, who had been leaning against the door to the office, straightened up and, in his characteristic slow-motion way, sauntered over to the gun still lying on the floor.

"Sorry. 'Twasn't nothin' much," he answered Marion. "Some nut got hold of my gun and was doing a number on the women."

Jim scooped up the gun, tossed it in the air, caught it between his hands, made a clicking sound, cracked it open and shook it upside down. A bullet dropped out.

"Didn't know we were playing Russian Roulette, did you, Kate?"

The phone rang. And rang. And rang.

I picked up the one closest to me. "Thespians' Company . . . yes . . . The only rules are — apply in person if you're over eighteen, be prepared to do a five-minute scene with a partner in two weeks. And, please, no monologues, no scenes from Shakespeare . . . Any weekday between ten and twelve . . . You're welcome."

An Unexpected Gift

by RICHARD A. MOORE

Even a Crooked Santa May Yield to a Charitable Impulse on Xmas Eve

DOC WAS CURSING himself for keeping the bar open. One sad, lonely drunk was his only patron, and he began to fear it would be his only business for the rest of this Christmas Eve.

The place had been fairly active while the department stores were open. Men bedecked with bundles stopped in for a quick one before heading home to the family. They claimed it was more fun to shop the night before Christmas and give the gifts while they were newly harvested. Doc agreed with them even when their hands trembled as they told war stories of battles over sweaters or toys.

In years past, he would close at nine on Christmas Eve. But without a family waiting at home, it was purely a business decision. When he saw the television listings gave him a choice between a Wayne Newton Special and Oral Roberts, he decided to experiment with a late evening.

Maybe the cold snap had kept people in, he mused, unwilling to admit a hunch devoid of all reason. He glanced down the bar at the drunk, who slumped on a stool despite all the vacant tables. Melancholy. Jesus, he was sick of melancholy drunks and this was the season for them.

Doc was wiping the bar with a beefy arm when he heard the door open. A man in a Santa Claus suit stood in the doorway, surveying the room. He was in full regalia, red suit with white trim, a matching stocking cap, black boots and a medium-sized sack that wasn't quite empty.

Apparently satisfied with what he saw, Santa marched to the bar and took a stool. Doc watched it all with a deadpan look.

"Just passing through, I suppose?"

Santa blew a wisp of the flossy white beard from his lips and smiled. "That's right. It's a busy night for me. But I've got time for a quick bourbon."

Doc mixed the drink without a word. He polished the bar in silence while the drink was half-consumed. Finally, he sighed.

"Okay, Bub, you got me. I can't stand not knowing what you're doing in that outfit in my bar."

Even the beard couldn't hide the smile. "Would you believe, making a list and checking it twice?"

"Come on!"

"I've been doing the Santa routine in a department store down the street. Naturally, tonight's my last night and for a kick I decided to wear it on the walk back to my room. You daydream about doing crazy things when you sit for hours with kids wearing out your knees."

Santa pushed his glass forward. "How about some more Christmas cheer."

Doc poured the bourbon and, after a moment's hesitation, made it a double. "You do this Santa business every year?"

"Yeah, I've got a neat gimmick. I rent the suit myself early in the month. Department stores always need more Santas in the last couple of weeks but by the time, they can't find the suits, because every car lot and dime store have added their Santas. I waltz in with my own costume and they have to pay my rates."

A voice with any angry edge came from the other end of the bar. "Just so you can squeeze another dollar out of Christmas."

They both turned to look at the drunk. He was a kid, really, no more than twenty. He hovered over his drink like a nearsighted miser counting his money. With his thin body and hatchet face, he might have just finished a seven-course dinner but he still looked hungry.

"Don't pay any attention to him. He's on a Christmas blues drunk."

"You're damn right I am. I'm drinking to the death of Christmas. Santa Claus is in the bar with me, bragging about making a buck when he should be out delivering gifts."

Santa held up a white gloved hand. "Now wait a minute. Just because I step in here to get warm doesn't mean Christmas is dead." He paused and stroked his beard. "What's your problem, anyway? What are you doing in a bar on Christmas Eve?"

The drunk never lifted his eyes from his drink. "I've got a reservation for a flight home that leaves in two hours but I haven't got the money to buy the ticket. I've only been in this town for three months and when I came up short, nobody would lend me the money to get home. So I'm drinking what I do have."

"Folks expecting you, eh?"

"Yeah, and I haven't gotten up the guts to call my Mom and tell her I'm not going to make it."

The silence that followed grew heavier as it lengthened. The man in the red suit stared at the drunken kid for an eternity and then shattered the quiet with a slap of a palm on the bar.

"Just how short are you, son?"

The drunk looked up in surprise. "I started off tonight sixty dollars light and I must have spent fifteen in here. But there just ain't no way, man. I've tried everything."

Santa hopped off the stool and bent over his sack. Doc leaned his heavy body over the bar to stare and saw the red arm pull five twenty-dollar bills from a nest of green inside. Santa walked to the end of the bar and tossed the money in front of the drunk.

"You should have asked me for it sooner."

The drunk stared at the money in disbelief. "If this is a joke . . ."

"The only joke will be if you don't take this money and grab a cab to the airport."

The drunk looked soberly at the red-clothed man for ten full seconds. There was a teasing look in Santa's eyes but there was determination under the ridiculous false whiskers.

"I almost believe . . ."

Santa tapped the pile of bills. "If you aren't out the door before I count to five, I'll keep this money."

The drunk grabbed the money and stuffed it into a pocket. He reached for the white hand but Santa moved away.

"I don't know why you're doing this, but thanks."

"*One.*"

The drunk smiled, nodded and walked to the door. He looked back once, then darted into the darkness. Santa broke the silence with laughter that began slowly but soon dropped all restraint.

He walked back to his stool and continued to laugh until he noted the frown on Doc's broad forehead. "Now you have to admit

that was good. Did you see the look on that kid's face? That's something he'll remember long after we're dead in the churchyard."

Doc leaned across the bar and pointed at the sack. "What I want to know, Bub, is where all that money came from in the bag. Department stores aren't that generous with their temporary help."

The laughter settled down to a smile and Santa glanced at the sack. "Well no, they had a bit of help from me."

Doc ran a hand over his almost bald head. "You better tell it all."

Santa thought for a moment, then shrugged and smiled. "Might as well at this point. Everything I said was true but I used the access as Santa to move about and look the place over. Tonight at closing, I stayed hidden until the store was deserted and then cracked the safe. I've had more practice at that than as a Santa."

Doc shook his head. "Okay, now get out of here."

Santa pulled a bill from a pocket but Doc stopped him. "I don't want your money—not *that* money. I hope you're caught and put away."

The door opened and a policeman stepped into the bar, freezing both men into silence. The newcomer looked about and spotted Santa. "Jesus, you might not be doing much business but you got the star of the show." He grinned at Santa. "All right, what brings you here?"

"Stopped in for a drink. I'm sort of a bargain-basement Santa." He glanced at Doc but the bartender avoided his eye.

The cop leaned against the bar. "Somebody knocked over Zell's Department Store a few minutes ago, Doc. He apparently set off an alarm just as he was leaving and we're checking on the chance he might still be in the area. Have you see any suspicious types in here tonight?"

Doc thought for a long moment, then cleared his throat roughly. "Only people in here for the last hour was me, Santa and a drunk—and the drunk left. I think I'll close up, business is so bad."

The policeman smiled. "You should be at home anyway. Nobody ought to work on Christmas Eve." He headed for the door. "*Nobody.*"

There was silence after the door banged shut. Finally, Santa spoke softly. "Why didn't you blow the whistle. You said you wanted me to be caught."

Doc grimaced. "I still hope they catch you. I hope they catch you and give you a cell with a view. But I don't want it to be because of an act of kindness. That wouldn't be right, either."

Santa smiled. "Thanks."

Doc glared at him. "Now get the hell out of here! I'm closing."

The Weapon

by ROBERT H. CURTIS

Even Unconscious Cruelty May Inspire Counter-Measures Equally Cruel

"A WINO found murdered," Lemuel Penn commented to his wife as he scanned the morning paper. "I suppose that this is confirmation that Granville is growing. We're beginning to get big city crime right here." Penn took off his glasses and wiped his face. "I think my temperature is higher," he said. "I called Atherton and he wants to drop by later this morning."

"That's good," his wife said without enthusiasm. "It's wise to be sure that you don't have anything serious.

"I told him it was only flu, but he said he doesn't like diagnosing fever over the telephone. Speaking of fever, don't you think that that cute Diane Lee warms up Jason Atherton considerably?" Diane was the young assistant Atherton had hired a year ago to ease the load of Miss Pritchard, his regular nurse.

"Yes, I noticed," Anne Penn replied. "But he's too old for her.

"I disagree, but it's academic. She obviously doesn't have any romantic image of him although perhaps she's intrigued with the mystery of his past life. He never says why he left the city to come here.

"Big city crime has always been present in Granville," Anne said, returning to her husband's original comment. "The only thing is that it hasn't been diagnosed."

"What are you talking about?"

"I'm talking about corporate murder, business efficiency murder. That's big city crime, isn't it?"

Penn sighed. He was only thirty-nine but he felt older today. "Please don't talk about Walter now. I don't feel well."

"When I think about my brother, I don't feel well either. You so easily could have kept him on at the store.

"We've been through all this. Don't you realize that almost two years have gone by? I hope you get some perspective soon. Obviously I didn't think that when I let Walter go it would lead to his suicide. In fact, I'm not sure there

was any relationship. It was just a matter of time.

Just a matter of time. "It was exactly a matter of time," Anne replied. "When Louise died, he fell apart. Like us, they were childless, and my poor older brother, having lost everything, couldn't concentrate at work. He couldn't put in a full day. Isn't that amazing? Could *you* have?" Her husband started to answer but she waved him off. "That was a silly question. But since he didn't have your 'strength,' why did you have to badger him? He would have recovered if you had allowed it. And you seem to have conveniently forgotten what I told you at the time."

"What you told me?" Penn was confused.

"Yes, what I told you." Anne's voice now had a desperate quality, the result of inability to completely exorcise a torment. "After you fired him, he came to me and cried. He begged me to intercede for him and I tried. You know all that. His tears, my tears. And still you refused to consider.

Five years ago, Lemuel Penn had been awarded the "Young Businessmen of the Year" trophy. He had become Granville's first millionaire. "My so-called image played no role in my actions. Walter was doing nothing either during or after Louise's illness. Nothing! I didn't build my business with dead wood.

sounded. "Look Anne," he continued. "I'm a businessman, but I'm a human being as well. You won't believe this because I've never told it to you before, but I thought that I was helping Walter. I mistakenly believed that the shock of being jobless would help him come to. Honestly, that's what I thought would happen. That Walter would see that life must go on. I told him that if he shaped up, I would reconsider. I would have hired him back. In retrospect, it's clear that my course of action was wrong. Mea culpa, and I'm more sorry about that than anything I've done.

Anne Penn looked directly at her husband. He appeared tired but completely sincere.

"Lem," she said. "It's an ill wind. While you don't feel well, at least I'll get a reprieve from the club this evening."

"I can guarantee that I'll feel well enough by tonight to go to the club and complete my plans to discuss certain business matters," Penn replied. He was nettled by his wife's accusation. "My determination to perform my job represents the distinction between your brother and me. It's strength supported by discipline. Indisposition does not immobilize me. I would even go to the store later, but since I can work at home this afternoon, that won't be necessary."

"It's not just your fever,"

Anne said. "You have diabetes too."

"And I control that as well," Penn replied testily. "I regulate my own insulin injections twice a day."

"I still don't see why you can't postpone your club activities for a day or so." Her distaste seemed ironic now as she recalled her girlhood. The Granville Country Club, out of financial reach of her parents, was her Camelot in those days.

"Because I can't. It's as simple as that. There was a time when you didn't take the club for granted. You used to love it." Penn's voice was challenging.

"It was fine for the first few years. But you talked to me then. Now you spend most of the night playing poker. I'm bored, Lem. I don't like continuous small talk." She recognized her waspishness and wondered if she had always been such a shrew.

"You don't like anything." Penn usually did not respond to his wife's litany, but his malaise combined with her needling had forced a retort.

"I *used* to like a lot of things." Now she retrieved memories of those early days and answered her own question. She had been happy and uncomplaining when, six years ago, she had married the bright young man of the town, the one with a "future." The predictions had been on target although Penn's success had far exceeded anyone's expectations. He had become the city's leading merchant and had also bought the shoe factory, the only large industry in Granville. He spent his days at the store, leaving the management of the factory in the hands of its former owner. But how he had made his millions was a secret well guarded from the citizens of Granville.

Actually, he had become a commodities speculator. In a risky medium, he had emerged triumphant. Those sycophants who hoped to learn some inside information never profited from their flattery. Penn's negotiations with his New York broker were private. At the club poker sessions, he would talk freely about merchandising but would not discuss the factory and became vague when asked about other investments. "I've got a few deals working," he would confide to the questioner, implying that at a later time he might have more freedom to discuss them. Then he would talk about the store again.

"You really want to know what you can do?" Penn asked his wife.

"I think I know what you're going to say. You're going to tell me to—" Her answer was interrupted by the doorbell chimes. She walked to the hall and answered the door.

"I hear we have a man living at this address who has finally

admitted that he's sick." Penn could hear the jovial voice of Jason Atherton. The doctor walked quickly into the breakfast room where Penn sat in his bathrobe. "How high is your temperature, Lem?" he asked. Dr. Atherton, the same age as Penn, was somewhat portly and always seemed a bit out of breath.

"You're in worse shape than I am, Jase," Penn commented. "My fever is 101 degrees Fahrenheit, but I could do three laps around the block right now and not come back huffing and puffing the way you are. You charge enough for good advice, so why don't you take some of it yourself and lose twenty pounds." Penn's laugh turned into a paroxysm of coughing and Atherton waited until it had subsided.

"You sound terrible, Lem, but at least you're breathing. The poor fellow I autopsied at the medical examiner's office this morning won't ever cough again. Drunk in an alleyway and some hoodlum clubs him to death. The police have a suspect. And when they picked him up, he had three dollars in his pocket."

"Murder for three dollars. Not very rewarding," Anne said.

"Few murderers are smart," her husband answered, "and frequently they aren't even impassioned."

"How was the urine test this morning, Lem?" Atherton asked, returning to his patient.

"Two plus, negative," Penn responded. "I'm spilling a little sugar because of the flu, but I feel fine."

"Let's see," Atherton said and proceeded quickly to examine his patient.

"You didn't find anything, did you Jase?" Penn asked when the examination was completed.

"No, but I think that considering the diabetes along with the fever, a brief hospitalization would be—"

"I know. Safest," Penn interrupted. "But forget it. I feel better than I did earlier when I called you."

"I won't press the point," Atherton said. "I know your attitude about Granville Hospital, but I have to cover myself. Anyway, aspirins and fluids should do the trick. How bad is the chest pain, by the way?"

"That's stopped. It hurt earlier when I took a deep breath. That's why I phoned. Remember, you insisted on the house call." Atherton started to protest, but Penn cut him off. "I don't mind, Jase. I can afford the charge and besides, you gave me a respite from a bout of nagging. Do you have a cure for that?"

"Well now, Lem," Atherton mumbled, trying to avert further discussion.

"Let me give you some advice, Doctor Jason Atherton," Penn said. "I know you're interested in that pretty little assistant nurse

of yours and I don't blame you, but—"

"Lem," Anne said, trying to stop her husband.

"Let me finish, please," he said to Anne. Then he turned to Atherton. "Don't try to deny it, Jase. I've seen the way you look at Miss Diane Lee, and as I was saying, I don't blame you. But in the first place, she's too young for you. You're a reasonably good catch and in time you could win the young lady's affection, but I'm trying to save you trouble in the future. I assume that what I'm telling you will be kept in confidence." Penn looked at his wife for an instant before returning his attention to the doctor. "Don't ever get married. They're all the same. Delightful until the ceremony is over and then the complaining starts."

"Lemuel!" Anne's voice was threatening, but Penn ignored her.

"Look, Jason, I believe you have a pretty fair chance of continuing that single-blissedness, but if you decide that being a bachelor is not for you and if Diane is for some reason unavailable, you can change places with me. Know anything about running a department store? She's beautiful"—he pointed to Anne—"and she goes with it. How about it? I know a lot about diabetes and flu."

Atherton was clearly embarrassed. His face reddened. "I'm sorry I stepped into the middle of a family argument."

"Any time you came would be in the middle of a family argument, Jason," Anne said. "I apologize for my husband." She escorted the doctor to the door and then quickly returned to the breakfast room.

"How dare you embarrass me in front of Jason," Anne snapped.

"You brought it on yourself," Penn replied. "I'd suggest that you relax and calm down. Unless," he added, "you'd rather leave me."

"Maybe I should."

"You say that frequently, but you've become used to a different standard of living. Unfortunately for you, this state allows no alimony, so divorce would solve nothing. You can have your old salesgirl job back, though. That might be enough, but then your sports car would have to go and—"

"There is no need to elaborate, Lem. Your New York lawyer made everything quite clear to me after you rewrote your will last year."

"You talked so much about leaving me then that I thought certain specifics should be included and you should be officially informed of them. Walk out and you don't get a penny. Since you're stuck with me until I die, why not try to be a little more pleasant?"

"There's something I don't

understand."

"What's that, darling?" he said. "I'll be glad to amplify."

"I know why I stay on. In your own words, I know where my bread is buttered. But why do *you* want me? You're forever disparaging me. Why do you want me?"

Penn's incredulous expression was mocking. "Don't you know? I'm certain I've explained all this. *For appearances.* You're good to look at and not a bad hostess. Concerning your disposition, what I told Atherton is true. You're all essentially the same and I've decided that one hostess is as good as another. Under those conditions, it wouldn't make sense for me to change horses in the middle of my lifestream. Now if you don't mind, I'm going to take two aspirins and then nap for an hour. Do you think you can rest your vocal cords for a while?"

Anne turned and left the room, clenching her fists as she walked upstairs.

II

THIS EVENING is beginning like any other, she mused, *and it shouldn't.*

Penn had taken his insulin shot and the two of them were sitting in the living room prior to making the short drive to the club. The day, of course, had been different. Lemuel had stayed home, and in the afternoon Miss Pritchard had called. She said that the doctor was concerned about her husband's condition and refusal to go to the hospital. Dr. Atherton wished to speak to Lemuel but her husband, involved with some business statements, shouted to Anne that he felt fine and couldn't come to the phone. "Tell Jason I'll call *him* if I need him," he added. Now, once again, they had settled down to deadly routine—evening paper and dinner at the club.

"Lemuel," Anne said quietly. "There are a few things you should know." Penn did not look up but continued to read the paper, although he seemed somewhat fidgety, as if something was bothering him. Usually he read with complete concentration. "Some things about our marriage."

"You've complained enough today," he warned, looking up.

"What I have to tell you is new. I've made certain decisions and it's important to me that you understand them."

"It's warm in here. Open a window, for crying out loud!" Penn took a handkerchief and wiped the perspiration from his face. "I think I need new glasses." He tossed the paper to one side.

Anne moved to a window, opened it, and returned to her seat. There was a bonus in having the largest house in town. You also had the largest grounds and

could talk comfortably without nosy neighbors being able to monitor the conversation. "You took me for granted from the start," Anne continued. "Poor girl marries rich boy with future. And in exchange for all this"—she gestured across the length of the living room—"you could purchase a reasonably attractive wife. Well, you were wrong, Lemuel. I wanted the good things all right, but more than that, I wanted you. Until I really began to know you. That was when you began to abuse my brother. You brutality woke me up. After Walter's death, I was too depressed to act on my feelings, but at least I knew them."

"This isn't new," Penn complained, sweating more profusely now. "Get to the point. I'm going to skip the club and go to bed. My flu is worse."

"Very well," Anne said. "The point is that you are a genuinely cruel man. You have a character defect and nothing can change it. You are evil. Also, I know about the factory."

"You know *what* about the factory?" Penn asked, finally alarmed.

"That you're completing negotiations to close it and sell the equipment. You plan to keep the gutted factory as a tax write-off and a speculative land deal and fire the employees. This will have the same effect on Granville's economy as if Boeing closed down in Seattle. Also, I believe you plan to move with me to another area after signing the final papers. It wouldn't be safe to remain in the midst of unemployed men and women made desperate by your greed."

"The letters in my private drawer—you've been reading my private mail?" Penn almost groaned.

"But of course. Now then," she continued, "do you remember what you suggested to me this morning?"

"No."

"You told me for the umpteenth time to leave you if I didn't like things the way they were. Well, I've decided to take you up on your offer."

Penn looked up, his eyes registering disbelief and astonishment at the same time. She had so often threatened in anger to leave that the threats had been mutually recognized as empty. Now, there was a finality in her tone.

"Did you hear what I said, Lemuel?" She looked directly into his eyes. and he found it frightening.

"Yes, I heard. You don't have to talk so loud." He tried to stand up but eased down again. His flu was worse than he thought. That's why everything was so different—even Anne's voice. "You like money too much to leave me. Everything is in my name."

"So you've explained. And you've also told me how I've gotten used to my standard of living. True to a certain extent, but your money hasn't been used the way I'll use it."

"What do you mean, the way *you'll* use it?" Penn's speech was a little thick, as if he had had one drink too many.

Anne ignored her husband's question, continuing with her own thoughts. "Other men have found me attractive, you know. Some of them very nice. One in particular, Lemuel. And I feel about Jason the way he feels about me."

"What are you talking about?" Penn was slurring more.

"Did I say I was leaving you?" Anne asked. "I phrased that rather badly. Actually, you're leaving me. And in addition you're leaving me your money."

"I don't understand."

"I didn't expect you would. You never have. But let me explain. You've poisoned yourself. You regulated yourself with curare instead of insulin. Jason Atherton gave me the substitute bottle this morning, and I adjusted the fluid level while you were napping."

"You're lying. Jason doesn't give a damn about you. He loves Diane Lee."

"Learn some facts quickly, Lem. Jason is not a bachelor. He is a widower. He loves Diane Lee because her full name is Diane Lee Atherton. She's his daughter, but I'm the only one who knows that. He thought patients would feel more comfortable with Diane Lee than with Diane Atherton. Further, I'm not lying. Why do you think your vision is blurred? Why do you feel so warm? Why does my voice sound so loud? Why can't you stand up?"

She paused because what she had to say was very important to her. "You see, Lemuel, I had to choose my weapon very carefully. Curare was *not* my weapon. Any old poison would have done the job. No, Jason Atherton is my weapon, and because I chose so well, you will die of a 'heart attack' in a few minutes. Miss Pritchard knows how concerned the doctor was about your chest pains and refusal to be hospitalized. Also, she heard your shouting when you would not come to the phone this afternoon. 'My he's stubborn,' she said."

"You'll never get away with it." Penn was drooling now, barely able to speak. "They'll know you poisoned me."

"You're wrong, Lemuel. You see there are advantages to living in a small town." She stopped talking and walked to the couch. Then she whispered in her husband's ear. "You've forgotten something, Lemuel. While Jason Atherton is one of five doctors in Granville, what's more important is—he's the *only* coroner."

Rawlings Baits The Hook

by ROGER GANS

Constable Rawlings Had a Bare Nodding Acquaintance with Violent Crime. But He and His Deputy Knew How to Handle It When It Happened.

TOWN CONSTABLE Bert Rawlings was working a bass toward the side of his canoe when he heard his phone ring across the lake. As usual, he ignored it. With quick, sure motions he netted the struggling fish, yanked the hook out of it, and tossed it in a sack in the bottom of the canoe. Happily anticipating a fresh fried breakfast, he turned the canoe into the wind and began paddling home. The phone was still ringing when he got there.

"Yo," he said.

"We got a dead one here, Bert," crackled a voice from the receiver.

ings. "That you, Henry?"

"Yup," said Henry. "It's the truth, Bert, so help me. One of the summer people from around the west side of the lake."

"Now that's too bad, ain't it, Henry?" said Rawlings, as he scooped some old bacon fat into a frying pan and set it on the stove. "Eat too much, did he?"

"Don't think so, Bert," said Henry. "Looks more like somebody took a shotgun to him."

"Where you at, Henry?"

"Mary Fletcher's place."

"Well, you just set there, and I'll be right along." Before leaving, Rawlings ran a few inches of water into the sink to revive the bass. With a little luck, it would still be kicking at lunchtime.

Henry's old pickup was parked on the road above the Fletcher camp, and there was a late model sports car parked in the driveway. Rawlings left his Jeep behind the pickup and walked down the gravel driveway to the cottage.

Henry met him at the door with a cup of coffee.

"Found some doughnuts in the cupboard, too," said, Henry, leading the way to the body.

"He won't be needing them, I don't suppose."

"Guess not," agreed Rawlings. "Who is he?" He pointed with half a doughnut at the corpse.

"Name on his license says Shiller," answered Henry. "Joseph Shiller. From New Jersey. Born 1946. Wallet's just full of money and credit cards."

"One of them rich fellers," said Rawlings. "I don't guess he was robbed, then." "Guess not."

"Well, I suppose I ought to call Mary Fletcher and let her know she's got some cleaning up to do." Rawlings picked up the kitchen wall phone.

Mary Fletcher said that Joseph Shiller had rented the camp for the whole month of July, paid in advance. She wondered whether she would check with his next-of-kin, since he still had three weeks left on the rental. Rawlings said, "Now, don't you worry about that, Mary. You just see if you can't rent it to somebody else for the rest of the month."

Mary Fletcher was definitely upset about the murder. She was afraid she might have trouble renting the place once folks knew there'd been a murder there. Rawlings reassured her.

"You only rent to out-of-staters anyway, so how they gonna know unless you tell 'em?"

"Hand me another doughnut, will ya, Henry," said Rawlings after he hung up the phone. "Let's see if we can't figure this thing out." "How'd you come to find him?"

"Well," said Henry, "I heard that Mary'd rented the place a week ago, so I figured it was time I got over here and sold this feller a fish-and-game license. When he didn't answer to my knocking, I walked on in and found him lying there.

Rawlings bent over and laid a hand on the dead man's chest. "He's pretty cold, Henry, so I guess you didn't do it. Not unless you spent the night here."

"Naw, Agatha'd never stand for that, Bert. She don't even let me out after dark."

"Anyways," continued Rawlings, "I guess we can assume that somebody drove up here last night, shot this feller, and then drove off. Now who do we know around here got a shotgun?"

"Everybody around here's got a shotgun, Bert. You know that."

"That's true, Henry. So it coulda been anyone who lives around here. Of it coulda been somebody that followed this feller up here from New Jersey.

"Yup," said Henry. "All regular summer folks."

"Oay, so it coulda been one of them, too. And I bet they don't all use shotguns."

"Probably not more than one or two, as I recall."

"So we could check them all out, find out who's got a gun and if it's been fired recently. That

would be quicker. At least there's less of them."

Henry reached for his pad of licenses and started to get up. "Hold your horses there!" said Rawlings. "It don't have to have been one of them, either. We still got some more figuring t' do. But as long as you're up, you could pour us another cup of coffee."

Rawlings took the refilled cup in one hand and scratched his head with the other. He really began to concentrate. "Now this feller," he said, "he's got an expensive car which somebody didn't want, a wallet full of money which somebody also didn't want, and a bunch of credit cards on top of that. We can bet he didn't get shot by some burglar. And whoever shot him probably planned it out ahead of time, because it's not likely you'd bring along your shotgun for a friendly visit in the middle of the night. And since it was planned ahead of time, we are not about to find that shotgun in somebody's garage. It's probably at the bottom of some lake, or down somebody's well."

Rawlings took another sip of coffee and stared down at the corpse. "Finding the guy that done this ain't gonna be no easy thing, Henry," he said. "But on the other hand, we can't have all these summer people thinking we can't take care of law and order 'round here."

Henry nodded his head in agreement. The summer people were bad enough as it was. "Should I give Harvey Martin a call, Bert?" he asked. "Maybe he can give us a hand."

"Good idea, Henry. He ought to be to the gas station by now. Let me talk to old Harvey."

Henry dialed, then handed Rawlings the phone. "Yo, Harvey," said Rawlings. "I'm down at Mary Fletcher's camp. Got a car here you might be wanting for parts." He hung up the phone and reached for the dead man's wallet.

"Here's some for you," said Rawlings, extending a handful of bills. "And here's some for me. We'll leave the rest for Mary. I think that's only fair." He turned and looked down at the corpse. "And here," he said, "we got a big hunk of fishbait."

"There you go," said Henry. "I always said you was the best constable this town ever had."

"Aw, go on," said Rawlings, blushing.

II

Rawlings and Henry spent the rest of the day out on the lake, catching about five times the legal limit of brown trout and black bass, but since one of them was the town constable and the other was the game warden, nobody was going to make them throw any back.

The Miser

by LAWRENCE TREAT

Jean Lanville Could Forgive His Lovely Wife Leaving Him For Another Man. It Was the Cost He Could Not Endure.

THE TOWN OF Roscoff borders on the sea and has the cold Brittany fog, the harsh Brittany wind and the broken Brittany sky. It is famous for its Marine Biology Institute and for its baths, and you can buy Roscoff seaweed in small plastic bags or else you can take the cure, but the majority of Roscoff inhabitants pay attention to neither. They farm, they fish, and they gather seaweed to fertilize their fields of artichoke.

The house that *Monsieur* and *Madame* Lanville built in the center of town was stone, like all the other houses there, and it blended into the neighborhood. A few people remarked that now that the Lanvilles were newly retired from teaching, he was finally spending some of his money, for the house had a number of luxuries, such as an electric stove, central heating and a fireplace that took logs a full meter in length.

Early in November the Lanvilles, Jean and Jeanette, settled in. Everyone knew that they bought the cheapest wine and accepted all the farm produce Madame's brother chose to give them, and that in the winter, they turned the thermostat down to eight, which was just high enough to keep the pipes from freezing. As for their car, it stood outside their house and was rarely used because, as Jean remarked, you can't run it without petrol, and petrol costs money.

Their frugal habits, however, attracted little attention. Bretons are notoriously thrifty, and if the Lanvilles carried thrift a little too far, what of it? Why shouldn't they stretch out their francs,

when they had a long retirement to look forward to? Or at least Jean did, if heredity meant anything. Witness his mother, who was approaching one hundred.

She approached it warily, around the corner so to speak, in a daily routine that never varied. She was gnarled and deeply scarred with the ravages of age, but she clung to life like a leech fastening onto a piece of tissue. And Jean loved her deeply, for she ate so little that it cost him almost nothing.

She lived alone, in an abandoned stone tower alongside the Lanville house. It never occurred to the Lanvilles to ask her to live with them in their fine new home, nor did it occur to her that she could. It was enough that she descended once a day, just before six in the evening, when Jean's new television set broadcast the evening news.

She huddled close to it, one of her deaf ears all but glued to the speaker, her half-blind eyes riveted on the magical picture which she could barely make out. She stayed for the duration of the political news, which she loved. As soon as it was over she stood and left.

She did not speak to either Jean or Jeanette, nor they to her. It was enough that she appeared. Words, like food and money, were not things to be wasted. In many ways, the newscast sustained her and gave her life purpose. As Jean often told people, *"Elle adore le politique."*

Whether Jeanette resented the dullness of her life, nobody knew. She had married Jean because, at the time, she had little choice, and it was only later that her loveliness glimmered. People remembered her as a plain girl and they found it hard to associate her early plainness with the graceful charm of mature Jeanette.

Perhaps motherhood had had something to do with it, or perhaps Jean's stark masculinity had brought out this inner beauty that had formerly been too shy to assert itself. In any case, they were now both retired, their son married, and there was already a grandchild, which made four extant generations. What greater fullness could the Lanvilles wish?

When the letter from America came, the postman delivered it personally. "Letters," he told his friends, "come to the Institute from all over the world, but to the Lanvilles? In six months, the only handwritten letter they received came from Paris. And now *this!*"

The neighbors discussed the matter, but neither Jean nor Jeanette revealed the contents of the letter, at least not in words. It was obvious, however, that some major event was brewing,

for Jean started up his car and drove to the nearest petrol station, where he filled up.

Armel Chabut, who lived across the street from the Lanvilles, asked the question tactfully. "You are going some place?" he said to Jean.

Jean shook his head. "Ah, no. Who can afford to travel? Who, except rich Americans?" Which was news indeed.

"Why," Armel asked his wife that evening, "did Jean mention rich Americans? And only a few days after he got that letter."

"Perhaps," she said, "there is a connection. Perhaps a rich American has left Jean some money. Why else would be buy petrol?"

"Maybe," Armel said, "he expects a paying guest."

Thus, in a way, the visit of Richard Chandler was forecast.

He arrived in relative pomp, in that the Lanvilles met his train. Early in the morning, Jean started up the car, and he and Jeanette drove to the railroad station at Morlaix, where Chandler picked them out immediately.

"I will wear a blue turtleneck," Jean had written. "and *Madame* a red skirt."

To the surprise of both Jean and Jeanette, Chandler spoke passable French. "Enchanted," he said. "It is so unusual for an American to be invited into a French home. It is most generous of you."

"Our mutual friend who suggested it," Jean said, "was once my star pupil. He sends me Christmas greetings every year. He never fails. And from one who is famous, like him, it is an honor. I am glad to repay his kindness."

"The pleasure," Chandler said, turning towards Madame, "is mine." And he smiled.

It had been a long time since she had been the object of any gallantry, and she smiled back. Thereafter, a bond was established between them. But Jean, whatever his defects, was not stupid, and he was careful from the very beginning never to leave Chandler and Jeanette alone.

"I must go to my brother-in-law's farm," Jean said, the morning of the next day. "He grows cauliflower and cabbage, besides the artichokes for which we are famous in this part of Brittany. You will come with me?"

It was half question and half command.

"You will be interested in our Breton farms. We fertilize with seaweed, which is exposed in quantity when the tide recedes. A thirty-foot tide, you understand."

"I have heard of it," Chandler said, "and I'm axious to see."

"On the way back from the cauliflower, then," Jean said. "It will be low tide by then."

It was a large cauliflower, and Madame cooked it and served a third of it for dinner, reserving the rest of it for the next two days. Perhaps for that reason Chandler invited the Lanvilles out to dine.

Jean refused. "No," he said. "Restaurants are expensive; they are a waste of money."

"A good meal is never a waste," Chandler said. "Where shall we go?"

"There is a small bistro on the quay," Jean said. "Farmers often eat there. Perhaps you noticed it?"

"I was thinking of something a little more festive," Chandler said. "Isn't there a good hotel, for instance?"

"It is expensive."

Chandler turned to Madame. "But is it good?"

She seemed to melt. "They say that it is."

"Then that's where we'll go."

"It's a long walk," Jean said.

"We'll take a taxi."

"*Never!* Not while I have my car!"

Jean drove there reluctantly and parked a block away, where it was easier to find space. At table, he scanned the right side of the menu and chose *merlan,* because it was the cheapest.

"We can start with *pate,*" Chandler said. "Or would you rather have asparagus?"

"It is the wrong season for asparagus," Jean said, "which is why it costs so much. And as for the pate, it is best when it is home made. And cheaper."

"Good," Chandler said. "We'll have both."

But when the two orders came, Jean pushed his plate aside. "Thank you," he said in a low voice, "but I'm not hungry."

The next day he had indigestion, doubtless at the memory of all the francs Chandler had wasted on dinner. As for the wine that Chandler bought in the grocery store and presented to Jean, it never appeared on the Lanville table. And Chandler overheard the reason. He was in the living room and reading *Figaro,* but the Lanville voices carried.

"That wine," Jean said, "is very expensive."

"He can afford it," Jeanette said.

"He is teaching you bad habits. Look—we will keep it, and after he leaves I will exchange it for our regular wine. We can get five of our bottles in exchange for this one."

Whatever Jeanette said in reply, Chandler did not hear.

At breakfast on the fourth day, Chandler dipped a piece of stale bread in his bowl of *cafe-au-lait* and looked up. "Madame," he said, "I would like to see how a French housewife in a small town goes marketing. Would it be too much if I asked

if I could accompany you?"

Jean answered. "But naturally you will come with us," he said. "We will leave at nine o'clock."

Chandler bowed. "You are very kind."

Armel heard about it from his wife that evening. "The American went to the market with the Lanvilles this morning," she said.

"With both of them?"

"Exactly."

"But Jean hates it. Where did they go?"

"To the town market. The American paid."

"What did they buy?"

"Artichokes. And fruit and salad greens and three kinds of cheese."

"*Ah!*" Armel said.

"And almost a kilo of veal. The Lanvilles—*imagine!*"

"Since Jean did not pay, I can well imagine it."

"He did not like it. He kept saying it was too much, and he did not look well. Even the butcher noticed how pale he was."

"And Jeanette?"

"She was radiant. The butcher remarked upon that, too."

"It would be well if the American left soon. It would be well if he left before Tuesday, when Jean goes to the bank at Morlaix to deposit his pension check and make his mortgage payment. I hear he intends to pay five thousand francs extra, toward the principal."

"If the American pays for petrol, Jean will drive. They can all go together."

They did not. Jean took the bus, as usual, and after he was gone, Chandler ordered a taxi for the day.

Armel saw them leave. "She looked happy," he said, "and there was a glow about her that only young girls usually have."

"She is not young," Armel's wife said tartly, "and that glow you speak of—it can flame up. I think I smell trouble."

"Yes," Armel said, and he sighed.

Later, on the basis of what Lucas, the taxi driver, told the police, they put together the events of the day.

"The wind was blowing," Lucas said, "and the tires make noise. I could hear little of what they said, just a word here and there."

"Such as?"

"They spoke of America, and he told her much about it." Lucas tried to remember in greater detail, but could not. "They held hands," he said.

"Where did they go?"

"At first, they told me to go to St. Brieux. He wanted to see the cathedral."

"What did they do there?"

"Nothing. They got out of the car and they laughed and decided not to go into the cathedral. They laughed a lot all day, and at St. Brieux they bought two

apples." Lucas let the news sink in. "Red apples," he added. "They ate them."

"And then?"

"Then they told me to drive to Dinard, where they had lunch at the hotel. They told me it was a very good lunch. They had sole Normandy, and a Montrachet to drink, and *Madame*—well, she was like a bride. It made one happy merely to see her. I wonder what my wife would be, if she had Montrachet for lunch."

"You said *Madame* Lanville looked like a bride. What about the American?"

"What would you? I paid attention to *Madame*, not to him."

"After lunch, what then?"

"It was a warm day, almost like summer, and they said they wished to go to the beach. I waited there for a long time. *Monsieur,* one has thoughts, unworthy thoughts. For example, I was afraid that they'd go off—*pouf!* Like *that!* Without paying me."

"But they did come back."

"After two hours. It was a long wait, because when an idea takes possession of you, you suffer."

"Okay. You suffered. And after you'd gotten over your suffering?"

"When they returned, she seemed so gay, so reckless, as if she was entering a new life. *Monsieur,* do you remember when you passed your baccalaureate? It was like that. As if she had achieved some goal and was making a great resolve for the future."

"Did she indicate what that great resolve was?"

"She apologized for making me wait so long, and I said it was nothing, I was glad to wait if she enjoyed herself. Then they whispered to each other and she nodded, and the American told me to drive to a tourist office. There, they went inside and stayed for fifteen minutes, and then they came out and told me to drive back to Roscoff."

"What did they talk about on the trip back?"

"At first, nothing. She fell asleep, and the American put his arm around her and she rested her head against his shoulder, and she did not snore. My wife snores, but *Madame* Lanville does not."

"She slept all the way home?"

"No, *Monsieur.* She slept a short time, and when she woke up, they talked. You can be sure that I listened carefully, and I can tell you what they said. Not every word, but the subject of their conversation."

"Yes?"

"He kept telling her that she must make up her mind to do it now, that it would be folly to wait. He kept telling her that she had only one life to live and she must have the courage to

enjoy it to the full."

"Did you hear anything that would lead you to believe that she planned to leave her husband and go off with the American?"

Lucas pretended that he was thinking the matter over for the first time. "Well," he finally said, "yes and no."

"What do you mean by yes?"

"They spoke of America, of how she would enjoy it, and she said she was glad she had made up her mind, she knew she'd never regret. That, and the way she slept with her head on his shoulder—that's yes, is it not? What would you?"

"And the no? What did you mean by no?"

"They said nothing direct. They did not say that they would go to American together. I give you the inference, but does that make it so? Assuredly not."

The inference, however, was almost universally made in the town of Roscoff.

Armel saw Chandler leave the following morning. "It was clear," he said, "that there was no great friendship. There was a certain stiffness. *Madame* did not come to the door. Jean stepped out first, then the American, and he was carrying his own bag. That was not polite. Jean was the host and he should carry the bag. But that was not the curious thing.

"The curious thing was that when they got in the car, Jean opened the door to the rear, the American stepped in and that was how they drove to the station. To the local train that connects with the express at Morlaix, that is how they went. Jean driving with nobody next to him, and the American in the rear seat."

"That was in the morning?"

"Yes. He was back before ten, and they were in the house all the rest of the day. They did not leave. They were together."

It was a full week before the police were able to trace Chandler and question him, and by that time the police had made up their minds. Once the police make an official statement, they can't change it. Or at least they don't.

"When Jeanette and I got back that evening," Chandler said, "Jean was furious. He asked Madame where we'd been and what we'd done, and I said I'd been wanting to see the Brittany coast and we'd gone to Dinard.

"He said he had not asked me, he had asked *Madame,* and then he said he'd like to speak to her alone. I went upstairs and washed, and then I called to Jean and said maybe I'd better go out to dinner, and he said that was an excellent idea. So I went to the hotel. I didn't see them when I got back."

"But you did see them again, did you not?"

"At breakfast. It was a very silent breakfast, and I was quite aware that they both wanted me

to go, so that they could straighten things out between themselves. It didn't take any great sensibility to realize that.

"But the peculiar thing is, she hadn't told him. In the light of what happened, I'm sure she didn't. Not until after I'd left. Rather wonderful of her, don't you think?"

Madame Chabut all but finished the story.

"When Armel told me about the manner of their departure, with the American not even sitting next to Jean, I was worried, and I went across the street to their house, and I knocked on the door. I knew that *Madame* must be in trouble.

"All the years that she and Jean had saved up their money for the house. And even now, every cent they saved went into the mortgage. It bothered Jean to owe money. All he wanted in the world was to be free of debt.

"First he wanted a house, then he wanted to own it free and clear. It was more than a point of honor for him. He could not face his friends if he owed money. He thought they would all talk behind his back and point him out. 'There goes Jean Lanville,' he was afraid they'd say, 'and the bank owns him.'"

"What did *Madame* say when you knocked on the door?"

"She did not open it, and her voice through the door was not natural. I think she was crying, but she said she was busy and she asked me to come back later. I don't think she'd told him yet. I think she was trying to decide exactly how to put it."

"So you didn't see her again?"

"That's right. I waited for Armel, and we went there together. Armel knocked on the door and Jean called out for us to come in. The door was unlocked, which was unusual. Always, Jean locked the door. He was afraid of being robbed, he was afraid that someone would take his television set."

Armel finished the story. "I could tell at once that there was something very wrong. Jean was sitting in the big chair where he always sat—the one big chair with the flowered upholstery. It had been left over from the curtains in his sister's house, and Jean got it for nothing."

"You said Jean was sitting in a chair."

"In *his* chair. You must understand that a man has a right to his own chair in his own house. To the biggest chair. It is his birthright. I myself—"

"Just tell us what you saw."

"I *am* telling. Jean was sitting in the big chair, and in the other chair—you see, there are only two comfortable chairs in that house. One for *Monsieur* and one for *Madame*. I don't know where the American sat while he was there. Perhaps on a kitchen chair.

It was never used, you know. Jean never bought wood for it. He was not an extravagant man."

"So we understand."

"The old woman was sitting in Madame's chair, and the two of them, Jean and his mother, seemed to have an understanding. It is hard to express what I felt about them. Mother and son, they just sat there, and when I said good evening, neither of them answered.

"Not that the old woman could have. She hardly ever spoke, and she certainly couldn't hear what I said. I think she was waiting for the evening news, as she always did. *Monsieur,* do you think that she herself will be on television? It is possible, is it not?"

"I don't know, but I'll be grateful if you finish your account."

Armel shrugged. "What is there to say? I walked past, and then I saw her. She was lying in front of the fireplace and there was a great deal of blood. It made my wife sick. They tell me that the body had been lying there for three or four hours.

"I think Jean waited for his mother to come, he wanted her to be the first to know. Not that they could have talked, because the old woman was deaf. But he needed her presence. He must have unlocked the front door after he killed her, and then sat down and waited. There must have been a fight. I suppose the old woman came down at her usual hour, which was a little before my wife and I arrived.

"I don't think that the old woman really saw Jeanette, at least not in any real sense, not in detail, but she must have been aware of what had happened, so she sat down quietly, to keep her son company. Perhaps she expected something to eat, or else for the police to come, or for her son to explain—who knows?"

"What did you do?"

"What *could* I? I protected my wife from the sight, and then Jean spoke to me. 'You have the wrong idea,' he said. 'Everyone will probably have the wrong idea and think that she was going to leave me and run off with Monsieur Chandler, but that is not so. She had no such intention. That is not why I had to kill her.'

"'Why then?' I asked.

"'Because she wanted to go traveling, alone. Still, even that would have been supportable if she'd only been reasonable about it, if she had been economical. I would have let her go to America on a visit. It had nothing to do with Chandler. She could have booked on a charter flight, I could have stood that. But—the *Concorde!*'"

"Then, as if she'd heard every word, the old lady leaned forward and nodded her approval."

The Horseless Headman

by CHARLES PETERSON

When Old Colonel Bashford Went on the Warpath, Strong Men Quailed — It Took a Quiet Girl to Stand up to the Blast.

AT FIRST GLANCE, the Donnybrook Military Academy *("Where Tomorrow's Leaders Learn to Lead")* seemed much as usual, that Friday morning in April. But a shrewd observer might have noted telltale signs of something brewing. In the way the red-brick administration building appeared to be vibrating, for instance, as though teetering on the edge of a volcano about to erupt and slay thousands. In the way the ivy on the ivy-covered walls seemed to tremble and shrivel before one's eyes. In a muted, low-pitched rumble suggestive of tumbrils and heads rolling.

In a word, Colonel Lionel Bashford was on the warpath.

One of the early casualties emerged from the headmaster's office as I approached—Watkyn Gosset, assistant headmaster, a thin, angular man who seemed to be all hands and feet and rather ineptly controlled by some unseen puppeteer.

He was followed by a volley of oaths of the type the Colonel might have employed on a recalcitrant Army mule in more youthful days. Ricocheting off the walnut-paneled corridor walls, they rattled the portraits of Donnybrook headmasters dead and gone, and Gosset winced as a particularly jagged epithet got him at the base of the skull before the door closed behind him.

"Oh, Miss McKay!" Gosset sighed, catching sight of me. He mopped his brow. "I wouldn't bother the Colonel right now, if I were you. He—he's a bit upset."

That seemed to be putting it mildly, as Gosset always put things. "Unfortunately, I have no choice," I said. "I have been summoned to the Presence. What's up? The track and field team caught in the local tavern again? Has one of our esteemed benefactors padlocked his checkbook?"

Gosset's pale eyes blinked, and his hands fluttered as though he

were about to fall into an attitude of prayer. "Worse than that! The Wipperly Horse is missing!"

"Good *grief!*"

That explained a good deal. Some fifty years ago, thanks to the enthusiastic but undisciplined pack-rat instincts of a Donnybrook Old Boy named Hubert Wipperly, the academy acquired a group of perfectly ghastly Oriental art objects, including a small bronze horse about six inches high.

Whereas the rest of the Wipperly Collection was housed in an open cabinet in Van Allen Hall, in hopes that some burglar would make off with its well-insured contents, Colonel Bashford had adopted the little galloping horse as a sort of good luck talisman, and kept it on his desk, where it prevented papers from swirling about during his periodic ululations. If the Wipperly Horse were missing, no wonder the Colonel was miffed.

Gosset dabbed at his temples again. "Thank goodness I have a botany field trip that will keep me away from here for the next two or three hours. Maybe he'll have simmered down by then. Maybe *you* can do something with him, Penny."

I gave him a wry look

"!!!!!!" the Colonel was roaring, as I entered his office.

"The !!!!!! you say!" I replied, having learned long ago that nothing exercised a more moderating effect on Colonel Bashford than a quick return salvo, especially if fired by a female.

"Eh?" he said. The windows stopped shaking and smoke ceased shooting from his ears. "Oh, it's you, Penny. You can't imagine what's happened!"

"Let me guess. The Wipperly Horse has disappeared."

Colonel Bashford's frosty eyes, having but recently returned to their sockets, bulged once again.

"How did you—? Oh, of course, Gosset told you. *Gosset!*"

"Suppose you give me the whole story?" I suggested, and held up a cautionary hand when it looked as if fire and flame were about to reissue from his nostrils. "Preferably in a quiet, calm, expository manner."

He subsided once again, contenting himself with the observation that he didn't know why in !!! he put up with such a !!!-ing sassy public relations director, when there were superbly qualified replacements beating at his !!!-ing gates every day of the week.

"It was there last night, I remember," he said at last, pointing to a spot on his desk which, had it been a newspaper photograph, would have been marked with a large white X. "I'm sure, because Gosset and I were talking about Moy Wu's visit, and—*oops!*"

I sat up. "Mr. Wu is coming here?"

Colonel Bashford acquired a

hunted look. "Forget I said anything, will you, Penny? Nobody is supposed to know—especially his son Franklin. And public .relations directors," he added, beetling his brows in my direction, "who might want to make something of it."

"That doesn't say much for my discretion," I huffed. Admittedly, Mr. Moy Wu was strictly handle-with-care—first, as a former Taiwanese political figure of some consequence; second, as a prospective bankroller for our badly needed new field house; and third, as a recognized expert in Chinese art.

And—incidentally—as the parent of one of Tomorrow's Leaders: Franklin P. Wu, aged fifteen. But, as I remarked to the Colonel, I wasn't about to commit such solecisms as addressing Mr. Wu in pidgin English, or asking him not to put too much starch in the collars.

"I know, I know!" Colonel Bashford hurried on. "I'm sure you're the soul of tact, Penny. The thing is, he wanted his visit unannounced in case he couldn't make it at the last moment. Anyway, I was hoping he might be persuaded to look at the Wipperly Collection. And the horse. So I'm sure it was on my desk last night."

"Cantered off in the wee small hours, you think?"

"Or first thing this morning. It was one of those kids, I'm sure."

"What kids?"

Colonel Bashford stirred uncomfortably. "That's why I called you, Penny. This could be troublesome. I had three cadets in here this morning for disciplinary infractions. The first was Rodney Van Allen—"

"*Oh*-oh!"

Anyone touring the Donnybrook grounds could hardly help noticing the Van Allen Gymnasium, the Van Allen Dormitory, the Van Allen Memorial Library—and might rightly conclude that the Van Allen name swung a good deal of clout in the neighborhood.

"The second was Franklin Wu—"

"Ho-*ho!*"

"And the third was—er—ah—*hem!*—young 'Flip' Carey."

"Ah-*hah!*"

Colonel Bashford winced. "'Ah-*hah!*' nothing! You asked me who the young men were and I told you—Van Allen, Wu and Carey."

"I see. Now tell me this, Colonel—did you call me over here to insure that when the finger of suspicion points, it points at my young cousin Flip, who happens to be here on a scholarship, rather than at potential gold mines like Van Allen or Wu?"

"Dash it all, Penny, I meant nothing of the sort! Don't go flying off the handle like that!" The Colonel scowled at the tips of his fingers. "Not that this is a hanging offense. It's just that—well, that horse is a good-luck mascot for Donnybrook! You

remember when it disappeared, six or seven months ago?

"First we lost the game with St. John's. Right after that we had word that Mrs. Wentworth Hadley had died—just before making her annual ten-thousand-dollar donation. Then, three weeks later, the horse reappeared on my desk . . ."

"And that afternoon we heard that Donnybrook was named in Mrs. Hadley's will."

"*Exactly!*" Colonel Bashford slapped his desk triumphantly. "All tied up with Wipperly's horse, you see?"

"What was her bequest again?"

"Oh, I forget. It's irrelevant, anyway."

"Something uniquely valuable, I seem to recall."

"Whatever. Getting back to this matter . . ."

"Oh, yes—it was a set of buttons from her grandfather's Civil War uniform, wasn't it? The luck of the Wipperly Horse in action."

The Colonel gave me a look that could have flayed one of those U.S. Army mules. "The point is, *Miss* McKay, there's a principle involved here, and Donnybrook Military Academy is firmly founded on principles that it is our task to inculcate into the malleable but questing minds entrusted all too briefly to our care, to be molded and shaped—"

"I know," I cut in ruthlessly. "I wrote that speech for you last Parents' Day, remember? What makes you so sure one of our boys is the culprit?"

"Who but one of those little thugs would want to do me in the eye? They know that horse is important to me—reason enough for one of them to try to pinch it. What I want you to do, Penny, is to undertake a discreet investigation and find out which of 'em did it."

"Hoping it turns out to be Flip, right?"

The Colonel sighed. "One of those lads is in for an unpleasant time, and I'll tell you frankly, it would be considerably less embarrassing for Donnybrook if that one turned out to be Flip Carey.

"However," he went on, forestalling the hot reply that leaped to my lips, "you find out which of 'em is responsible, and I'll promise he'll get the same treatment, regardless of who his father is. Or if we never get our damn' field house built!" he concluded, morosely.

Where to begin? I wondered, as I left the administration building and ambled across the field toward the dormitories. The question was answered at once as I spied the figure of Cadet Rodney Van Allen heading toward me. Tall for his age and willow-slim, Rodney had the fine-honed features that characterized most of the Van Allens and that somehow complemented the starchy shoulders-

back, head-up, eyes-front stance that would have bordered on exaggeration for almost anyone else.

"*Ahoy,* Cadet Van Allen!" I called. "Or, rather, ten-*shun!* I find these military terms confusing at times, don't you?"

"No ma'am," said Rodney, rigid as a poker, terribly impersonal.

"Come off it, Rodney. This is Penny McKay, not the Cadet Captain, remember? Where are you off to so determinedly?"

He almost unbent, but not quite. "I've been called to the office, Miss McKay. Will you excuse me, please?"

Enough of this badinage, I thought. *Time to go on the offensive.* "Rodney, do you have any idea who took the Wipperly Horse this morning?"

"No, Miss McKay." Then he added, with a suspicion of emotion. "I wish I did! Excuse me."

Frontal assault no good, either. "Okay, general," I said. "Have it your way. On to battle. But get that cap straightened or someone's going to hand a gig or two on you."

To my surprise, Cadet Van Allen blushed scarlet. "Yes, Miss McKay!" he gasped and marched away.

It occurred to me that Rodney could hardly be laboring under the burden of a guilty conscience if he were more disturbed over a misshapen parade cap than a missing objet d'art. Oh, well, onward and upward—to wit, to Wu.

The third hour bell caught me halfway up to the dormitory's second floor, and in seconds I was awash in cadets dashing back to their rooms for a brief unwinding before noon mess call. Carried along by the flood-tide, I arrived at Wu's door at almost the same moment as young Franklin P. himself, and he looked a bit startled as I descended on him. Like Macbeth, he may have been thinking, *Can such things be, And overcome us like a summer cloud . . . ?* Or maybe not.

"Please come in, Miss McKay," he said, and held the door open for me.

Flip was already lying on his bunk, dress jacket and shoes off. I contrived not to notice the magazine he quickly slipped under the pillow as I entered. I sat down on one of the two captain's chairs in the room. Franklin and Flip sat on the edges of their respective cots and eyed me apprehensively, much as an airline pilot might regard a passenger boarding with a loudly ticking briefcase.

"At ease, troops," I said. "This is not an official inspection."

"Yes, ma'am?" said Franklin.

"You know that the Wipperly Horse is missing?"

"Yes, ma'am," said Franklin.

"No, ma'am," said Flip, simultaneously. The boys looked at each other in consternation and

decided to edit the replies.

"I mean, no, ma'am," said Franklin.

"I mean, yes, ma'am," said Flip, at the same instant.

More consternation. I laughed. "Would you like me to step outside while you get your stories straight?"

Both boys would have liked nothing better, I was certain. There was a brief pause before Flip answered, "There isn't any story, Penny. We didn't know what we were supposed to say to a question like that."

"That's right," Franklin chimed in. "Why would we know anything about the horse?"

"Because you were in the Colonel's office this morning just before it vanished."

Flip looked thoughtful. "It couldn't have been Frank or me. We both went right from the office to our English Lit class. What would we have done with the thing if we had it?"

"You didn't come back to your room at all?"

"Not until after second hour," said Franklin. "Flip and I had to pick up our clean gym shorts. Rod was already here—I mean . . ." He broke off as Flip cleared his throat, loudly.

"Rod was here before you?" I prompted. "And he was the first of you three to see the Colonel this morning?"

Silence. At last Flip spoke up. "I'm sure the horse was still there when I was."

"And when I was, too," said Franklin, a shade too quickly.

"Okay, then." I got up to go, outwardly noncommittal, but with a sinking heart. They were all covering for each other, I thought, gloomily. Even Rod Van Allen had failed to act surprised when I mentioned the missing horse, so all three must have been involved. "Sorry to have cut into your free time."

I rapped at the resident faculty's door before recalling that Watkyn Gosset was off on his field trip, and was turning away when the door was plucked open. It was Jerry Coleridge, Donnybrook's resident wolf, who shared the suite . . . and reacted much as Foxy Loxy might have, to find Chicken Little on his welcome mat.

"*Down,* boy!" I replied to his hurried invitation to come in, sit down, relax, have a drink, visit et al. The "et al!" sort of hung in midair. "It slipped my mind that Watkyn wasn't here."

"Watkyn has something I haven't?" Jerry queried, his tone one of incredulity.

"But as long as you're here, tell me," I went on, prying my hand loose from his. "You have Van Allen, Wu and Carey in your English Lit class, don't you?"

"Yup."

"Were they all present today?"

"Wu and Carey were late. But they had admittance slips from the office."

"And Rodney?"

"Rod was absent this morning. Why?"

"Just checking on something for Colonel Bashford," I said. I looked beyond him into the sitting room. "Hey, that's a beautiful hanging. I didn't know you were interested in Chinese art."

"That happens to be Japanese," Jerry said. His voice lowered and I became aware that my hand had somehow got back within his grasp. "But I have some fascinating things from China, too. Would you like to see them? By candlelight? Over a light but unpretentious white wine?"

"Not unless one of them is a little bronze horse."

Jerry blinked. "Bronze horse? I'm mostly into jade and pottery. Why a horse, anyway?"

"Why not?" I gave him what I hoped was a dazzling smile and made my escape while he stood at the door, perplexed and half-blinded.

Rodney was absent this morning. My mind re-echoed Jerry's remark. *Why?*

With a feeling of utter non-accomplishment, I headed back toward the administration building, rather dreading the peppering of exclamation points that was sure to ensue when I reported to the Colonel. But for once my crystal ball was clouded o'er, for when I entered I found the Colonel beaming like a Botticelli cherub. Seated before him was a slight, impeccably groomed Chinese gentleman.

"Penny," burbled the Colonel, "I'd like to have you meet Mr. Moy Wu. And what do you think, Penny? The horse is back!"

It was, in fact, in Mr. Wu's hands at the moment and, after the amenities had been concluded, Colonel Bashford related that, having heard from the gatehouse that Mr. Wu's limousine had just turned in to the horseshoe drive, he had hurried to the main door to greet him. And, on returning to his office, the first thing to meet his eye was the Wipperly Horse in its accustomed spot on his desk.

"Mr. Wu was just having a look at it," the Colonel finished, with elaborate unconcern, "to see if it might—er—be worth anything."

Mr. Wu smiled. He dug into his pocket for a small gold penknife, with which he scraped a bit at the underside of the statuette. "I would say," he responded at last, "that it's probably worth its weight—in lead."

"Lead!?" the Colonel and I spoke as one.

"That's what it is, of course. Painted to resemble old bronze. Quite a recent piece, I should judge. All the same . . ." he paused, and there was a question in his tone.

"What is it, Mr. Wu?" I asked.

"The pose is curious. I know only one other example of a horse supported on one leg on the back of a swallow, like this one. It's

from the Han Dynasty, second century, excavated in 1969 in Kansu Province. The swallow, you see, is the symbol of Lady Chao, wife of the Emperor Ch'eng Ti, who was also called 'Fei Yen'—flying swallow—for her dancing skill. *That* horse is in the Brundage Collection, and this is almost a mirror image—the pose reversed."

"Then you think this one might have been based on the one in the Brundage Collection?"

Mr. Wu shook his head. "Reproductions of that piece are available. And they're of finer detail than this. If it were a genuine companion piece, of course, it would be, not priceless, but quite valuable—forty or fifty thousand dollars, I should say. But if such a companion piece existed, I would certainly know of it."

"Perhaps you'd like to look at the rest of the Wipperly Collection," the Colonel suggested, looking rather crestfallen.

"If time permits," said Mr. Wu politely. "I have only an hour or so, and I should like a few moments with my son."

"Certainly, certainly! He's probably in the mess hall at this moment. I'll see you over there, and perhaps you'll both be my guests in the faculty room. Will you join us, Penny? *Penny?*"

Startled out of a reverie, I said, "Thank you, Colonel, but I'm sure Mr. Wu and Franklin would prefer an opportunity to be together. Besides, there's something I want to check—the Academy attendance records since the beginning of the term."

It was some time after two o'clock when I returned to the administration building, and there was a certain *deja vu* sensation in finding Watkyn Gosset in the corridor once more. This time he was dressed in jeans, boots and field jacket, with his wooden specimen case in one hand. This time, instead of coming out of the Colonel's office with a flea in his ear, he was knocking for admittance.

"I imagine the Colonel is still at lunch," I said.

"Oh." Watkyn's hand fluttered in a vague gesture. "I just got back from my field trip and—er—I was wondering if anything had come to light about the—you know—horse?"

"As a matter of fact," I began, only to break off as I spied Colonel Bashford himself clumping toward us. He was beaming bonhomie to all quarters of the compass.

"*Capital lunch!*" he boomed. "Capital, capital, *capital!* Afternoon, Gosset—how was the fern and frog business? Come in, both of you. Hello! What's this? Door's unlocked. Distinctly remember putting it on the latch when we left for lunch. Odd!"

He stepped inside his office, and a split second later—

"!!!!!!!" cried Colonel Bashford, flaking paint off the walls

and making the crystals on the chandelier tinkle nervously. "The !!!-ing horse is gone again!"

For a while, I thought that either Watkyn or I would have to sit on the Colonel's head to hold him down. Watkyn kept asking if he shouldn't go to the dispensary, seeking sedation, and I kept telling him to forget it. Eventually the Colonel simmered down enough for rational thought processes to reassert themselves.

"What's that you said, Penny?" he demanded.

"I said I thought I might have figured out something about this mystery," I replied. "And maybe, if you'll cooperate, we can clear up at least some of it."

"What do you want me to do?"

"Get hold of Rodney, Franklin and Flip and have them in here right away. And Jerry Coleridge, too, while we're at it."

"Jerry's in class right now," Watkyn said. "Would you want me to cover for him?"

"You'll need to know which of those young ruffians is responsible for this," said the Colonel curtly. "I'll tell Coleridge to cut his class short and shake himself over here."

The Colonel busied himself on the telephone in a silence that deepened perceptibly as we waited. Finally there were footsteps heard in the corridor and all four marched in—the boys pale, Jerry merely quizzical. The cadets saluted and reported, and the Colonel put them at ease, then turned to me. "Well, Penny?"

"Cadet Van Allen," I said, "tell me what you know about the Wipperly Horse being returned to this office."

"Beg pardon, Miss McKay?"

"No pussyfooting, Rodney. You had it under your hat when I met you on the field this morning and you were scared to death it might topple off, or that I'd notice the peculiar lumps in your hat—which I did."

Rodney took a deep breath. "Yes, Miss McKay, I was bringing the horse back. I was in the hall, wondering how to get inside, when the Colonel suddenly dashed out, leaving the door ajar. I whipped in, put the horse on his desk and whipped out again."

The Colonel was shaken. "Cadet Van Allen, theft is a very serious matter . . ."

"Oh, Rodney didn't steal anything," I cut in. "Did he, Flip?"

Flip's knuckles were white as he faced the Colonel. "No, sir. He found the horse in my footlocker."

Gamely, the Colonel tried again. "Cadet Carey, theft is a very serious matter . . ."

"Flip didn't steal anything, either," I interrupted. "Did he, Franklin?"

"No, Miss McKay. Rod found it there when he returned to our room ahead of us—but we all knew it wasn't there earlier. I was going to say I'd taken it, because we

figured you wouldn't be as hard on me as you would on Flip. Then Rod said maybe we ought to try to put it back first."

Bewildered, the Colonel blew through his mustache. "Damnitall, *some*-thing's a very serious matter! Who has the dratted horse now?"

I swallowed, wondering what would happen if I were wrong. "Why don't you look in Mr. Gosset's specimen box?"

That was when Watkyn, his placid features turned into a vicious, wrathful snarl, leaped for me and grabbed my throat in both hands, knocking his chair over in the process.

It was so sudden that everyone was frozen in place for what seemed several minutes, and I was beginning to black out before I was able to bring my clenched hands up between Gosset's arms to break his hold, and then to hit him in the jaw before I fell back, drained, and Jerry was able to pull him off with the cadets' help.

I

"IT WAS taking it the second time that made me sure it was Watkyn," I told the Colonel later, when the dust had settled and Watkyn had been carted away. "The whole idea was to keep Mr. Wu from seeing the thing, and in this whole school only Watkyn and his field trip were unaware that Mr. Wu had already been and gone.

"So when Watkyn returned and saw the horse back on your desk, he quickly stuck it in his specimen box. Then, when he saw me coming, he pretended to be trying to get in instead of coming out. Then he was stuck. Every attempt of his to get away with the box was thwarted one way or another."

"But why plant it on Flip?" Jerry asked.

"Convenience. He expected the boys wouldn't be back until noon and didn't want to chance leaving it in his room—you knew too much about Oriental art and could easily have come across it somehow. He probably figured that if it were found on the boys, it would be considered just a prank."

"But look here," said the Colonel. "Why all this todo over a worthless lead horse?"

"It wasn't worthless when Watkyn first stole it—six months ago."

"Eh?"

"That first disappearance, remember? Somehow, he learned that it was the only really valuable piece in the Wipperly Collection—even Hubert Wipperly had to hit it lucky once in a while. It actually was the companion piece that Mr. Wu spoke of—a genuine Han Dynasty bronze, worth forty or fifty thousand.

"Watkyn stole it, made a mold and copied it in lead, then left the substitute on your desk while he went to New York and sold the original. He was the only faculty

member absent at that time, according to the attendance records.

"Then for six months he had no worries, until he learned that Mr. Wu was coming to visit his son. You told me, Colonel, that you and Watkyn had discussed the visit, and he knew you'd show Mr. Wu the horse. Watkyn knew Mr. Wu would have no trouble recognizing it as a fake. He was afraid that Mr. Wu might deduce that it was related to the horse in the Brundage Collection—a mirror image that was not known to exist, since it's been sitting in our collection for half a century."

"You mean a fifty-thousand-dollar statuette is lost to us?" the Colonel asked dolefully.

"Unless Watkyn can be persuaded to name the dealer, so we can sue for its return. It's clearly established as having belonged to Donnybrook for a long time."

From his expression, I could be sure the Colonel was going to leave no Watkyn unturned to bring this about.

"Thanks for pulling Watkyn off me," I said to Jerry. "Maybe I'll take you up on that offer to look at your pottery and try that unpretentious little white wine, after all."

"I dunno," said Jerry, dubiously, "if I want to show 'em to anybody with a left hook like yours. On the other hand," he added, after some consideration, "let's live dangerously, hey?"

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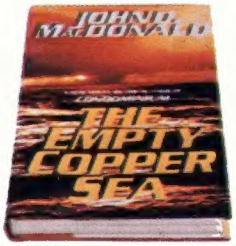

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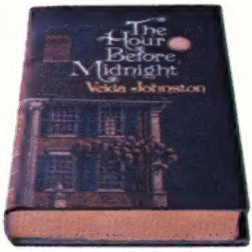

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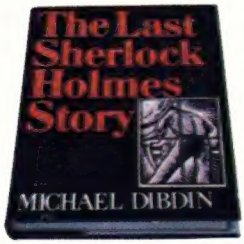

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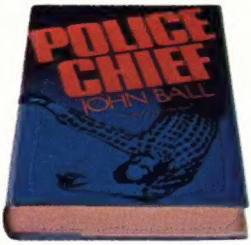

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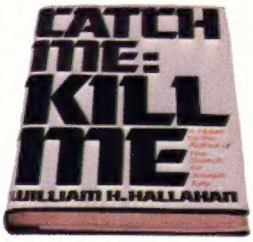

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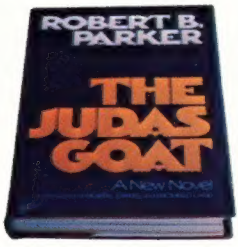

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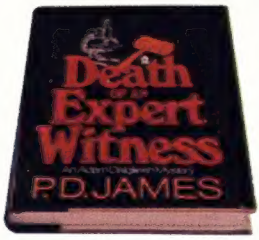

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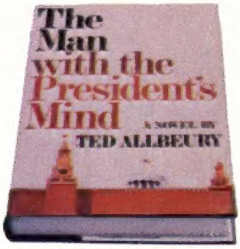

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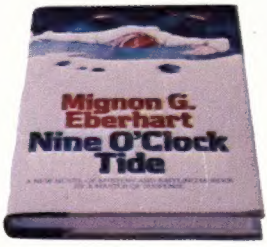

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